DEATH: The Dialogs

#116

THE HIGH COST OF LIVING
NEIL GAIMAN
SCRIPTER OF
SANDMAN SPEAKS!

★

THE NON-PRICE GUIDE ZINE!

★

CHRIS BACHALO
DELINEATOR OF
DEATH DECLAIMS!

DAVID ANTHONY KRAFT'S

COMICS INTERVIEW

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UP FRONT

DEATH

"Give me liberty, or give me death!"

Dead air. Dead reckoning. Kiss me, deadly. Deadbeat. Dead center. Dead wrong.

Grateful Dead.

Don't flog a dead horse.

Creeping death.

Sudden death.

Death, be not proud.

"It's dead, Jim, whatever it was."

Been done to death.

Dead heat.

Dead meat.

Deadline. Dead duck. Dead of night. Dead to the world. Evil dead. Better off dead.

Book of the dead.

Death of a salesman.

"In the long run, we are all dead."

-Dave

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"We've got Foxglove and Hazel from 'A Game of

KEMBERLY HERDING: *Let's start with the DEATH miniseries, "The High Cost of Living." For anyone who may not be familiar with the basic premise, Death takes on physical form for one day every 100 years, to better understand what it's like to be mortal. What sorts of things happen to her on her day off? What does she do?*

NEIL GAIMAN: Let's see, what does she do? Well, so far she's eaten an apple, she's eaten a hot dog, she's gone for a ride in a taxi, she's going off to listen to music...by the end of issue two she will have been kidnapped. All sorts of exciting things, especially the hot dog. People keep giving her things for free. She's wandering around with a young man by the name of Sexton Fernival, who's about sixteen and considers life as unfair, not least because he got called Sexton Fernival, and he's sort of tagging along. I bring in a few...actually there's only one SANDMAN character so far...no, I tell a lie, three SANDMAN characters have cropped up. Mad Hettie is in there, who is in SANDMAN #3. She's 250 years old, and Mad Hettie wants her heart. The reason Mad Hattie is so incredibly old is she did the standard sort of Russian folktale thing of hiding her heart, which is the kind of neat thing you do...you know, you put it inside a duck egg inside a wall guarded with dragons and the whole kind of thing. So she's hidden her heart somewhere...but she is more than a little potty, and she has an appalling memory, and she doesn't know where she put it. So she's...one of the things that happens to Death on her day off is that she gets grabbed by Mad Hettie, who says, "Right, young lady, I want me heart." So she's off to find that, and there's a very strange gentleman by the name of, um, no idea what his name is, but he's called the Eremite and he's after her. And we've also got Foxglove and Hazel, from "A Game of You," wandering in for a scene in a sort of basement nightclub thing. Not really a nightclub, sort of a club, in New York. Foxglove is starting a new career as a singer, I think mainly because she's been completely unable to sell any stories, and they sort of wander in. I'm enjoying it hugely. It's very funny, it's very quirky, it's not like an episode of SANDMAN,

NEIL GAIMAN

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You,' wandering in for a scene in a nightclub."

particularly. It doesn't have the same kind of feel that SANDMAN has. One of the things that's kind of funny is that there's an element of doubt. It is perfectly possible that she isn't Death. It is perfectly possible this actually is a young lady by the name of Didi, whose entire family was killed a few months back in a rather nasty accident, and who has gone a little bit crazy. That is a possibility, at least it is at this point. That's definitely what Sexton chooses to believe. He figures that anybody who says they are the incarnation of Death...

KEMBERLY: *...is- probably a little batty to begin with and should be taken with a grain of salt.*

NEIL: Exactly.

KEMBERLY: *She's certainly become enormously popular. Evidence of this can be found in the results of the survey taken during last summer's conventions, where the readers turned out an overwhelming response asking for Death to get some sort of feature presentation of her own. Did this have any particular bearing on DC's interest in doing Death material, or on your own interest in writing something for her?*

NEIL: Last year, about fourteen, fifteen months ago, before the whole sort of summer convention season, I got a phone call from Karen, and she said -- and I'd been talking, actually, mainly with **Mike Dringenberg** about doing a Death miniseries for awhile — and Karen phoned, and she said, "Well, we're just about to do a poll, and we're going to put a load of DC supporting characters ito this poll for the summer convention season, and let the people at the cons just vote for who they want to see." And I said, "So?" And she said, "Well, we were thinking of putting Death on." And I said, "Okay, and...?" And she said, "The thing is, if we put Death on, she'll win. So basically, do you want to do the series now? You know, do you want to do it within a year? If you don't want to do it within a year, we won't put her on the list." So I said...I thought about it and I figured, okay, it was a nice excuse to actually get me to turn the story from a nice idea and something I wanted to do one day, into something I was definitely going to do. So I said, sure, put her on the list. And she won. The fans voted for Death. I knew they would, I mean, ever since the death of Robin... She's nice, so it wasn't really...probably all that her being on that poll actually did was move it forward six to eight months, and actually make sure that I set aside the time for it.

KEMBERLY: *About some of her other*

Death — by Bachalo.

Neil Gaiman

words

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"Dave Sim is about to start a SANDMAN parody."

appearances - we don't have to talk about that ugly business with the Black Racer because that's been beaten to death, but she's shown up in LOBO, of all things, and Keith Giffen seems to keep turning her out of late.

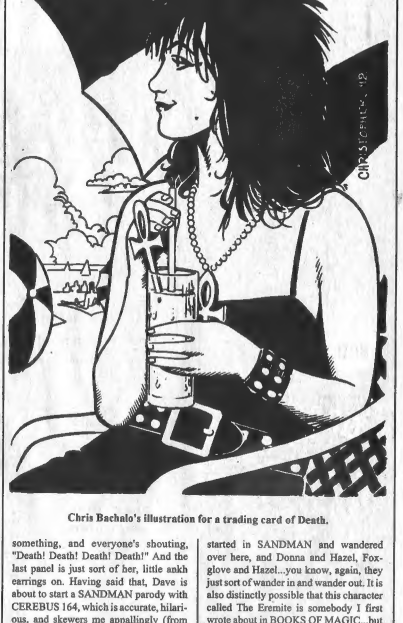
NEIL: He's very fun. Actually, the LOBO one I was a little bit irritated with, if only because they didn't run it past me. I got a phone call at the very last minute from Karen, saying, "We've only just noticed they put Death in LOBO, and they didn't run it past us either, and I can't show you the artwork, but this is the dialogue: 'Keep your hands to yourself, mortal,'" And I said, "Well, she wouldn't say 'mortal.'" So I think we took out the word "mortal." And I made them take out the "tee-hees" in the AMBUSH BUG SPECIAL. She was wandering around going "tee-hee." I'm sorry, Death does not say "tee-hee," she wouldn't say "tee-hee" if you paid her money. But...yeah, I think she turns up again when Keith destroys the universe, or blows up the planet Earth, in legion. Keith is very fond of Death. I don't really mind, as long as it's cameos, or as long as it's for fun. What I objected to with that CAPTAIN ATOM thing, and what people keep forgetting, is that what I objected to was not the fact that it wasn't particularly good, which it wasn't, but that was really neither here nor there...

KEMBERLY: *I don't think she was presented correctly.*

NEIL: Even that I didn't mind. What I objected to was this attempt to tie her into DC continuity and get it wrong, this sort of point where she stands there and she says, "No, I am wonderful, gentle, merciful death, and he is nasty death, and he is death as something else..." And it's sort of like, no, I'm sorry, but there isn't a Legion of Deaths. She's it. When the Black Racer hangs up his skis, she's the one there saying, you know, I'm sorry, get off the ski-boots? When Nekron, Lord of the Unliving, goes, she's the one there going, "Bye-bye." There is no...she's Death. That's it. And she's not merciful, sweet, nice death, she's...she's Death. She's what happens there. So that was actually my objection to that, which was really just the attempt to try and fix this in continuity, how does she relate to the other DC deaths? Well...she doesn't. She is. Other deaths come and go. She's Death.

KEMBERLY: *Is she the one you mentioned in the CBG piece that Dave Sim was going to misappropriate?*

NEIL: Oh, yeah. He has. He misappropriated her about eight months ago. There's just one cute little wonderful page...Cerebus is standing out on a roof or something, and everyone's shouting, "Death! Death! Death! Death!" And the last panel is just sort of her, little ankh earrings on. Having said that, Dave is about to start a SANDMAN parody with CEREBUS 164, which is accurate, hilarious, and skewers me appallingly (from what I've seen so far).



Chris Bachalo's illustration for a trading card of Death.

KEMBERLY: *You have a tendency to tie up your own loose ends in your stories, to show not just your characters' actions but the consequences to those actions. In light of this, will repercussions of the miniseries be seen in SANDMAN, or possibly other Endless-related material?*

NEIL: I'm not sure. Mad Hettie started life in SANDMAN and has wandered over to this storyline. Death herself started in SANDMAN and wandered over here, and Donna and Hazel, Foxglove and Hazel...you know, again, they just sort of wander in and wander out. It is also distinctly possible that this character called The Eremite is somebody I first wrote about in BOOKS OF MAGIC...but I'm not entirely sure at this point. Will it have effects? I don't know. I mean, I haven't finished it yet. I don't think so. My only real regret with it is that I don't have 48 pages per issue, rather than...I think 28 pages in the first, which we got by pleading with the advertising department to relinquish -- actually, they were terribly nice, I should say. I think we're 25 pages for the other two. I just wish we were a sort of BOOKS OF MAGIC length for each one. Then again, there's just a simple

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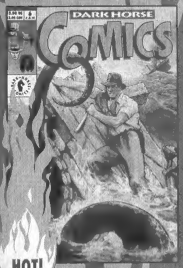

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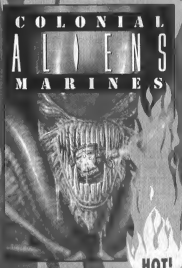

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THE WORLD'S GREATEST COMICS!

"One thing about DEATH — it is genuinely funny."

matter of cost. The format is going to be...they're going to look like LEGENDS OF THE DARK KNIGHT. It's on classier paper, it's **Steve Oliff** doing a beautiful coloring job, it is going to be lovely.

KEMBERLY: *You mentioned Mike Dringenberg earlier, and thinking about doing the DEATH project with him. How did you end up working with Chris Bachalo on this? Was it a matter of time constraints or scheduling?*

NEIL: It was a matter of...let's see, I don't know what the politic answer is exactly on that. Basically, **Mike Dringenberg** will never work again with **Karen Berger,** Karen will never work with Mike, both of them believe themselves to be in the right, and they just...they won't work together anymore. As a result of which, the Endless poster is really the last thing that Mike's probably going to be doing.

KEMBERLY: *No kidding? That was beautiful.*

NEIL: Yeah, it was lovely. I hope at some point in the future...the honest answer is, there is a matter of..."personal and musical differences" is how it's referred to in a band. But, basically, Karen and Mike will no longer work together, and Karen is the editor on this book, so...Anyway, Chris, Chris's first professional job was on SANDMAN #12, before SHADE, and he's a wonderful guy and a delight to work with, and we asked him if he'd be interested in doing it and he jumped at it. And we've got **Mark Buckingham** inking. He's great, and he is actually doing I think the best ink job I've ever seen him do. Just on those few pages they've sent me, and admittedly I'm looking at faxes here, but they're really lovely, and what's interesting is it doesn't actually look like **Chris Bachalo** and it doesn't look like **Mark Buckingham.** I'm not sure who it actually does look like, it's sort of like a punk **Brian Bolland** or something. There's this wonderful sort of artistic style...it definitely isn't the **Chris Bachalo** of SHADE any more than it's the **Mark Buckingham** of MIRACLEMAN.

It's very funny...that's the one thing about DEATH that I hope people will pick up on. It is genuinely terribly funny. And it's got this kind of, I don't know, CATCHER IN THE RYE-ish kind of feel to it in a funny kind of way. At least in terms of Sexton, who is...in some ways he's the hero, and in other ways you just want to slap him round the face and stand him in a corner until he cheers up. You know, "What have you got to be weltschmertz-y about?"

KEMBERLY: *Earlier this summer,*

Chris' very first attempt at drawing the character of Death (from his sketchbook).

"She looked very pretty and had huge erect nipples,

when you were at the Atlanta con, you mentioned that you were going to be using Death in an AIDS-awareness piece that would run some time down the road in DC's mature-readers books. When can we expect to see it, and how did it come about?

NEIL: I think it comes out the last week in December or the first week in January. I know it's just been solicited in the last solicitation. It'll run eight pages altogether, from sort of front cover-ish to back cover-ish. **Dave McKean** is doing the art. It's going to run in SANDMAN, SHADE, and HELLBLAZER, I think on the basis that DC figured that that covers everybody who's going to buy...that there isn't anyone else much out there buying DOOM PATROL or SWAMP THING or ANIMAL MAN who isn't probably buying one of those other titles as well. And I hope they're going to overprint, so that it can actually be sent out to comic shops in bundles or whatever. DC approached me and said, would I write an AIDS benefit book? And I thought about it, and I sent them a fax back and I said no, I won't write an AIDS benefit book. The reason I won't write an AIDS benefit book is, one, you're preaching to the converted. The only people who will buy "AIDS: The Comic Book," John Constantine fights AIDS or whatever, are the converted, the people who are interested or care already and go, oh, this is a good cause, I will plunk down my $1.50. So there's that aspect of things. Two, you don't need a benefit book at this time. The most a benefit book is going to raise...if it goes huge it raises $20,000 or whatever. You would be much better off giving everybody the information free, sacrificing $80,000 worth of advertising revenue, and donating the paper and so on and so forth, and educating. Right now, you've got a situation where the late teenage-early twenties, heterosexual group has the fastest-rising incidence of AIDS. That's where it's growing, that's where the main reason it's growing is because they don't think anything will happen to them. And there is a level on which I sympathize greatly - you're looking at a generation and an age group that is much more concerned with whether or not they're going to get laid than with any consequences thereof, which is why you've got so many teenage pregnancies all the time, and so forth. So I said, no, I won't do an AIDS benefit book, but this is what I will do. And they thought about it and they said, great. So it's Death talking about AIDS, and she talks about risky behavior, she actually demonstrates how to put a condom on properly using John Constantine and a banana. They stand there, basically, with the banana, and she demonstrates how to put a condom on, then sends him off again and eats the banana while she's talking. It's fun. I'm tremendously relieved; apparently it's been sent to various sorts of health advisories and AIDS research centers and so on and so forth, and they have so far all said, yes, this is really cool, there haven't been any changes they wanted made in terms of facts or information, which I'm very pleased with. It was a bastard to write. What was hardest about it some ways was the day that I actually sat down to write it, I got a phone call saying that a friend of mine had just died of AIDS and had asked that I be contacted, but nobody knew where I was because I was in the process of moving continents. Eventually somebody tracked me down and said, by the way, **Don Mella** died two months ago. Don was actually the first person I'd known reasonably well ever to die of AIDS. There were other people that I'd known peripherally, but Don used to be the publicist at Titan books for awhile, published a magazine called HEARTBREAK HOTEL, was part of the English comics scene... The last time I saw Don, not the last time I spoke to him but the last time I actually saw him, I was being interviewed, the AMAZING HEROES interview **that Mike Maddox** did. And I was in Titan and Don wandered past and stopped and said hi, and we turned off the tape recorder and chatted, and he told me about his ex-roommate who had just died of AIDS the previous week. She was a transsexual who'd got AIDS from bad blood during the transfusion, and the last thing she'd ever read was "The Doll's House." It was the first comic she'd ever read and the last thing that she read. I always figured that was one of the places that Wanda came from, just sort of being told that. Anyway, the morning I sat down to write the AIDS thing, I'd been really looking at trying to do...you know, how will I make this elegant, how will I make it funny, how will I make it this and that, and I got this phone call saying by the way, **Don Mella** died and asked that you be told. And all of a sudden I didn't really give a shit about being elegant and funny and intelligent and so on, all I wanted to do was get up on a little soapbox and start

Trading card artwork featuring the many folks that populated the BOOKS OF MAGIC limited series — pencils by Bachalo.

and it looked absolutely nothing like Death."

shouting very loudly through a megaphone, and I think to some extent that's what I did in the end. The sheer pointlessness of it is really stupid...there is no reason to die. It's a stupid thing to do. Especially when, with 50 cents worth of rubber, you don't have to.

KEMBERLY: *Referring again to the Atlanta con; you've mentioned the possibility of DC producing some other Death-related miscellany, such as a statue, unisex ankh earring, and so forth. Have you heard anything futher about any of these items?*

NEIL: I still don't know what's going to be happening. We're talking DC's marketing department here. There will be a poster. That's for sure. There will be a figurine, like the Sandman one.

KEMBERLY: *Is Randy Bowen going to be able to do it?*

NEIL: Randy is supervising it. Somebody else is actually doing it, and I know they sent in a first draft and it looked nothing like Death. I didn't see it, but I was told that she looked very pretty and had huge erect nipples and things like that, and it looked absolutely nothing like Death. So they sent it back, and I think Randy was going to be working on the face, correcting it or something like that...fixing it. But I don't know what they're going to do.

KEMBERLY: *I liked the idea of the temporary tattoos.*

NEIL: I hope they...my guess is, probably they won't do anything neat, because there's just a level on which...you know, it involves going out and actually costing temporary tattoos and doing stuff like that, and they probably will never quite get round to it.

KEMBERLY: *Jill, since you're here, could we perhaps talk about BLACK ORCHID a bit?*

JILL THOMPSON: Well, you can ask me, and if I have an answer, I'll give it to you. There's very little I know about it.

KEMBERLY: *When is it scheduled for release?*

JILL: I don't know.

KEMBERLY: *That's an honest answer.*

JILL: Once I start it, it'll probably be scheduled way too early. Supposedly in the spring. I'm guessing around April.

KEMBERLY: *Has Dick Foreman started writing it yet?*

JILL: Yes, I have the first script, But I don't start that till after SANDMAN's over, which, unfortunately, has to happen...

NEIL: One day. You've got at least four months.

JILL: I know, I already wrote "sniff" on a page..."it's #44 already -- sniff." It's really hard. I've done two pages of BLACK ORCHID that'll be in the Vertigo preview. It was really hard to switch gears. I'm definitely a one-project-at-a-time person. It was really hard to switch and do that...it took me almost a week to do two pages, to pencil and ink them. I just couldn't get anything done. It was really hard. I mean, the story was really nice and I liked it, it was just...nothing came to me, because I'm not in that mode right now.

KEMBERLY: *When was the decision made to do a BLACK ORCHID project?*

JILL: Tom Peyer's been after me since I'd been on WONDER WOMAN to do this thing.

NEIL: I suggested Jill for BLACK ORCHID a year and a half ago.

JILL: Oh, was that you? Tom never mentioned it.

NEIL: I think it was me. I remember talking to Tom about it and suggesting artists and writers, and you were the artist I suggested, although unfortunately none of the writers I suggested at the time panned out.

KEMBERLY: *From what you've seen so far, is it springboarding from the limited series?*

JILL: In a way. From the last we saw of Black Orchid, from Neil's issues, where they're heading back towards the city...well, it does end up back in the city, but from Neil's premise of kind of a single-mother type of thing, Dick doesn't deal with that right away. I'm not sure when he's going to start to deal with it. The first story doesn't have Suzy in it, but he plans on bringing her up. He wants to kind of reintroduce Black Orchid as a kind of myth that's been going around. I don't know if she's in New York City or if she's actually in Gotham City. I think it's Gotham. The first issue is called "Sightings," and there are strange sightings from people who think they've seen this thing or a woman who's affected them strangely, and they're not sure because she's pretty much learning how to interact with humans, or learning what human beings are.

KEMBERLY: *So is she still maintaining that sort of...vegetable sensibility that she had?*

JILL: There's a lot of vegetable about

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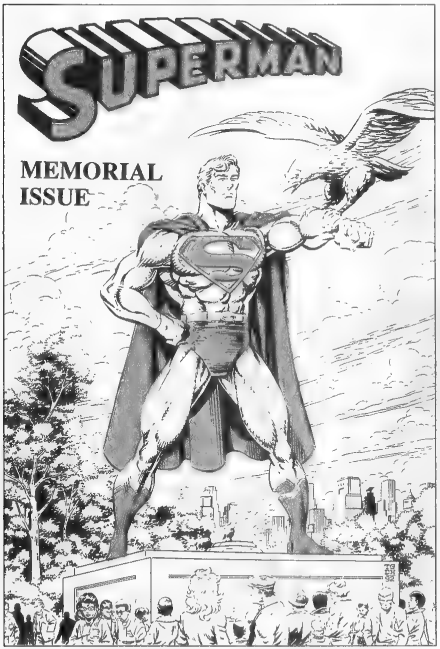

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"A lot of people die in 'Brief Lives.'"

her. But the first story is told from the perspective of this reporter who's been hearing all these things, and you hear things through him. It's not told from her point of view until some later issue.

KEMBERLY: *Let's talk about the current SANDMAN arc you're working on, "Brief Lives." How is it coming along? Chapter three is going to be the next one to hit the stands -- how many are we going to see? Six, maybe seven?*

NEIL: More. It's interminable. It just goes on, and on, and on...I'm six pages into SANDMAN #46 right now, which is chapter six, and I think we've got about four to go. I would like, if possible, to finish it in SANDMAN #49, partly because Craig is doing SANDMAN #50, and it would be really awkward to sort of get to the penultimate one of "Brief Lives," and then have SANDMAN #50, and then finish "Brief Lives" in SANDMAN #51. But having said that, if we have to do it that way then we have to do it that way. But I think it'll be nine, ten chapters. It goes on for ages, and there are lots and lots of people in it. The last issue was all about nude dancing, and this one's all about the use of cats as fertilizer, well, mummified cats as fertilizer. It literally has a cast of thousands. I keep making you draw different people, don't I?

JILL: Uh-huh. I've drawn 497 people.

KEMBERLY: *You kept count?*

JILL: No, I'm making it up! It's a cast-of-thousands kind of joke.

NEIL: But there are lots and lots of people in there. It's a very strange little story. I'm enjoying this story. This is a genuine picaresque...a slightly recursive picaresque, but it is...one of the things I always wanted to do with SANDMAN was move through each of the sorts of ways of telling a story, and "Game of You," with the exception of the last episode, it takes place over slightly less than 24 hours. The entire seven issues of "Game of You" covers about nineteen hours, and has a cast of a handful. So I figured that "Brief LIves" would be fun to do going on for ages, following people around, and having lots and lots and lots and lots of people.

KEMBERLY: *Crowd scenes?*

JILL: No, not...well, there's a couple crowds, but mostly it's just scenes with people, then the people are no more.

NEIL: They die a lot. A lot of people die in "Brief Lives." And Jill is just getting better and better, and is a delight to work with. It's a very strange and very interesting storyline, and I keep panicking. I phoned up Karen about a month ago, and I just said to her..."This isn't working, it's a huge mistake. I'm completely out of my depth. I'm completely lost, we should never have started this, I don't know who told me I could write in the first place and this has never happened before." And there was this pause and she said, "Yes, it has." And I said, "What?" And she said, "Well, the last time you did this was halfway through 'Game of You.'" And I said, "Really?" And she said, "Yeah. And the time before that, you phoned me up halfway through 'Season of Mists' and said exactly the same thing." And I said, "Oh. Did I really?" And she said, "Yeah." And I said, "Oh...okay. I'll shut up then." We're just collecting together "Game of You" right now. I reread it the other week, and actually was very impressed by how well it hung together. It hung together much better than I remembered, which was strange. I don't think I'd ever sat down and read the whole thing from beginning to end.

KEMBERLY: *I reread it myself recenily, shortly after rereading the "Season of Mists" collection, and I was*

This is Charles Vess' sketch for the third BOOKS OF MAGIC cover, displaying his interpretation of the Faerie. Another, unused version — featuring the witch — is on the following page.

Books of MAGIC
NEIL GAIMAN
CHARLES VESS
C.VESS.90

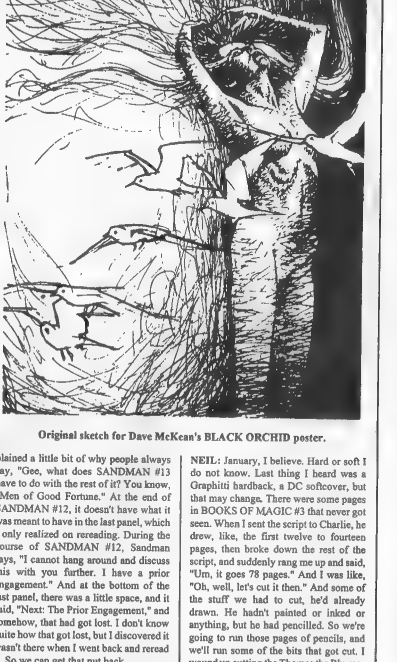
"It was a very strange little sleeper, BOOKS OF MAGIC."

surprised how much more smoothly it reread than it read the first time. Having it all together, you get the sense of immediacy that you didn't have, reading it every month, that this only takes place in nineteen hours.

NEIL: Yeah. That is unfortunately the thing you lose with it coming out over a period of seven or eight months. You also lose, over a period of seven or eight months, just the way that it is all one story. Because if you're reading it over seven or eight months, you get one episode of it that is pure, out-and-out horror, followed a month later by one episode that is pure, out-and-out fantasy, and it's sort of as if somebody's saying, "Well, I'm making a sandwich here, and the first thing we have is one piece of rye bread." And you wait a month and they say, "And we've got peanut butter." And you wait another month and they say, "And we've got cucumbers." What? Huh? This is too weird. But when you're actually just sort of handed it as a sandwich, it works fine.

KEMBERLY: *I got the same sort of thing from "Doll's House," that it reread collected better than it read in chapters.*

NEIL: I don't know. I still think "Doll's House" is a bit all over the place. I still think of it as a collection of linked stories, with a frame that is all part of one thing. But that was me trying to figure out how to do it all. There's a level on which I sort of felt like "Game of You" was going back to "Doll's House" and doing it right. Even though it doesn't...it's a completely different set of concerns. That's just looking at things as a storyteller. Oddly enough, I was just rereading "Doll's House," because we're finally going to get a new edition of "Doll's House." "Doll's House," as a book, was designed and put together in about a week. It was a sudden decision on DC's part, and if you think back, it actually came out between SANDMAN #16 and #17, which means that we were really working fast on it. In fact, there were a lot of things wrong with SANDMAN #16 that weren't fixed in the "Doll's House" collection because it hadn't been seen. We didn't realize these things were wrong. I remember **Robbie Busch**, for some reason, changed Rose's hair color between issues. I could never figure out why. End of #15, she's got red and yellow hair, issue #16 starts and she's a blonde. Things like that we can finally go in and fix. We're going to fix the design. And I got to read the whole of that, and I realized that one line had actually dropped out, which I'd never realized had dropped out, and it must have dropped out on the original comic, too, which explained a little bit of why people always say, "Gee, what does SANDMAN #13 have to do with the rest of it? You know, "Men of Good Fortune." At the end of SANDMAN #12, it doesn't have what it was meant to have in the last panel, which I only realized on rereading. During the course of SANDMAN #12, Sandman says, "I cannot hang around and discuss this with you further. I have a prior engagement." And at the bottom of the last panel, there was a little space, and it said, "Next: The Prior Engagement," and somehow, that had got lost. I don't know quite how that got lost, but I discovered it wasn't there when I went back and reread it. So we can get that put back.



Original sketch for Dave McKean's BLACK ORCHID poster.

KEMBERLY: *There's a BOOKS OF MAGIC collection in the works. I understand that there was some Charles Vess material that had to be cut from the original release of the third issue that may now see the light of day in the collection. When can we look forward to seeing it?*

NEIL: January, I believe. Hard or soft I do not know. Last thing I heard was a Graphitti hardback, a DC softcover, but that may change. There were some pages in BOOKS OF MAGIC #3 that never got seen. When I sent the script to Charlie, he drew, like, the first twelve to fourteen pages, then broke down the rest of the script, and suddenly rang me up and said, "Um, it goes 78 pages." And I was like, "Oh, well, let's cut it then." And some of the stuff we had to cut, he'd already drawn. He hadn't painted or inked or anything, but he had pencilled. So we're going to run those pages of pencils, and we'll run some of the bits that got cut. I wound up cutting the Thomas the Rhymer scene quite a lot. There was another song...it wasn't a very good one, but there was another song, so we'll run that. One of the things that I've been talking with **Bob Chapman** about is actually my writing Timothy Hunter's "What I Did on My Summer Vacation." Then you've got the thing at the end, the teacher's sort of..."C-

"While still in print, they were being reordered."

minus. You must learn to curb your imagination." It'll be fun to finally have BOOKS OF MAGIC collected, mainly because BOOKS OF MAGIC was one of those strange books that...one of the very few things I've ever seen, I mean, SANDMAN does the same thing, but the sales went up. They dipped in the middle, but then by the time BOOKS OF MAGIC #4 came out, they were ordering high on it, having seen how #1, #2 and #3 sold. Normally, they start off high and then they just tweeter down, and they were actually on their way back up. A lot of people somehow seem to have managed not to get hold of #1, #2, or #3 of the BOOKS OF MAGIC. A lot of people turn up at signings with three of them and complain that they couldn't get hold of #2, or couldn't get hold of #3. Hopefully, it'll finally all be in one place.

KEMBERLY: *They did sell quickly. The store we were going to at the time never seemed to have them on the shelf for more than about a week and a half before they were sold out.*

NEIL: It was a very strange little sleeper, BOOKS OF MAGIC. While they were still in print, they were being reordered at...I remember **Bruce Bristow** telling me they were going out at 2,000 a week or whatever, in terms of the reorders coming in and going out. It was a kind of little cult sleeper success, and a lot of people got onto it late.

KEMBERLY: *I remember talking to SANDMAN readers in various stores we'd go into at the time it was out, and they simply didn't know about BOOKS OF MAGIC and weren't picking it up because of that.*

NEIL: Yeah. It was never really heavily advertised or anything like that.

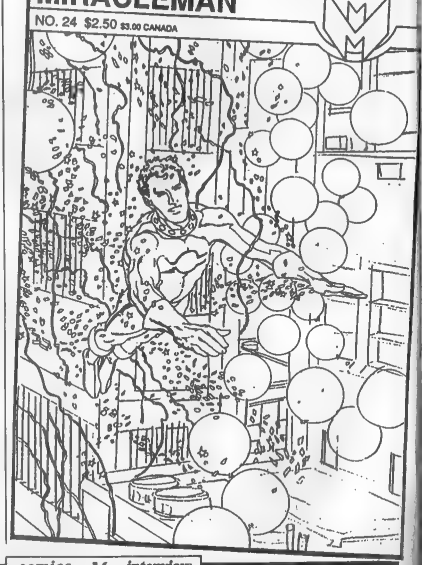
KEMBERLY: *Same thing's happened with MIRACLEMAN. People see it and they go, "Neil Gaiman? Same guy that does SANDMAN? Really? Since when? I'm gonna have to get that..." And we tell them, well, you can either hunt down the back issues as of #17, or you can get the trade paperback because it's been collected already, and it's as if there's been some sort of revelation or something. They just don't know.*

NEIL: I have to figure out a way to solve this. Seriously, it actually is something that I realized was happening when I was on tour, and I started to realize it because of things that people in signing lines would say. I'd do these signings, and there'd be 500 people there or whatever, and a lot of these were hard-line fans. And somebody would hand over a pile of MIRACLEMANs, or somebody would hand over some BOOKS OF MAGIC, and the people behind them in the queue would go, "What are they? Gee, where can I get these? Um...I'll be right back..." And I'd go, gee, there's definitely some kind of hole here.. And it would even go back to the couple of episodes of SECRET ORIGINS that I wrote, and stuff like that. These people out there simply don't know that I.ever wrote it.

KEMBERLY: *Jill, how many people out there who are raving over WONDER WOMAN or SANDMAN remember that you did ELEMENTALS?*

JILL: There are people that have brought up every single thing I've ever done. When we were in Nebraska, they brought up a JUST IMAGINE COMICS & STORIES, which was the very first thing I ever did, when I was fifteen years old. And I was like...I can't believe that somebody has this. And that I'm not embarrassed about it. Some of the ELEMENTALS I'm embarrassed about. I don't know. I was young. "It was just lingerie modelling, you know..." But a lot of people actually have come up to me with just WONDER WOMAN and have

Barry Windsor-Smith's pencil sketch for his cover painting for MIRACLEMAN #24.



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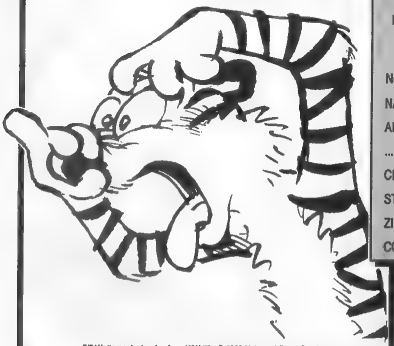

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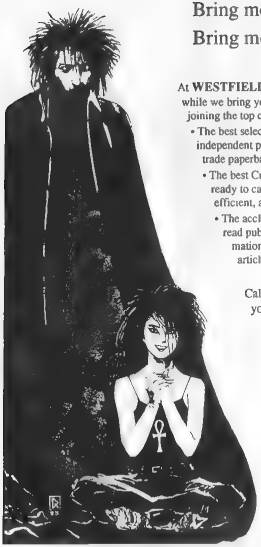

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"Am I writing an issue of SPAWN? Yes, #10."

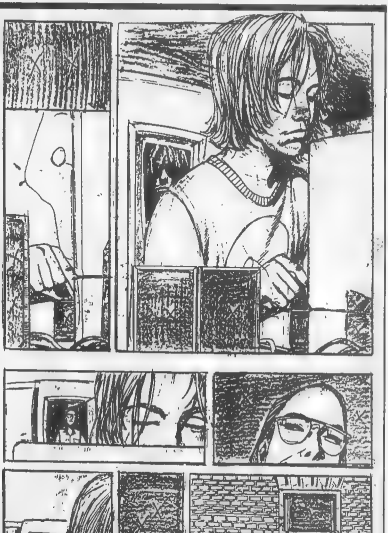
no idea that I'm doing SANDMAN.

KEMBERLY: *There's not a whole lot of audience crossover between WONDER WOMAN and SANDMAN.*

JILL: Yeah. I don't know, I think it has to be those people who buy all comics, because they like all comics, and then they might know. But either you get WONDER WOMAN people, or you get SANDMAN people.

KEMBERLY: *I understand you'll be writing an upcoming issue of SPAWN. Can you elaborate?*

NEIL: Am I writing an issue of SPAWN? Yes, I'm going to do SPAWN #10. It started, I suppose, at the Atlanta convention, where it was me and Todd in this room, signing, and sometimes I'd get in there first and sign for two or three hours and halfway through, Todd would arrive and then I'd go pack up and leave first. Sometimes Todd would be signing over in the other half of the room and I'd turn up halfway through and then he'd disappear. We'd been signing next to each other for two days, and we'd never had a chance to say a word to each other, we'd never even said hi. So at the end of...I think it was the last day...no, it was the Saturday of the con, I went over and I said hi to Todd after I'd finished signing. I think there was a level on which he seemed a little nervous that I was coming over, because it was sort of like, you know, he didn't know what I thought of his stuff or anything. We chatted, and I thought, gee, he's really nice. Then at the awards ceremony that evening, we met again, and I thought, this is a really nice guy. Then about three or four weeks ago, I got a phone call out of the blue, "Hey, Neil, it's **Todd McFarlane**," and he said, "How would you like to write an issue of SPAWN?" No, actually, the day before...the night before I got the phone call from Todd, I'd been chatting to **Alan Moore** on the phone. Alan sort of gets up at a sensible hour, so if I ring him before I go to bed at four o'clock in the morning, I actually get Alan when he's awake and we have a great chat. And he was saying he's going to be writing an issue of SPAWN. He told me a little of what he was doing and it sounded kind of fascinating and sparked a few ideas off. Then I got a phone call from Todd the next day, saying would I write one? Basically what he said was, the critics have been on his back about the writing. He said people have been bitching about the quality of the writing in the Image comics and so on and so forth, and he for one wanted to do something about it. So he figured he'd go out and get some award-winning, good



Bachalo's pencils for DEATH: The High Cost of Living, page 9.

writers to write something. So what do I do at this point? I have two options; either I take a moral stand and say, no, Image comics have bad writing and therefore I will not write an episode, or I could do something to improve it. And it was sort of like...well, okay. Yeah, fine, I have no moral objections to a well-written Image comic. What the hell, they are creator-owned things, there is a million times less compromise than the Marvels and stuff...yeah, sure. So his attitude was basically, you have carte blanche. I will draw it but that's as far as it goes, you have complete and utter carte blanche. What I'll probably do is...he basically said if I wanted to write it full script, I could. What I will probably do is write something sort of movie script-style...I will give him the "what's happening," same kind of way I wrote BOOKS OF MAGIC, like that.

For me, it just goes back to a discussion I had with **Dave Sim** ages and ages and ages ago. I was bewailing the quality of comics in the comics stores, and bewailing the comics stores, bewailing various things, and there was a pause in the conversation, and Dave said in his inimitable and lovable way (which normally

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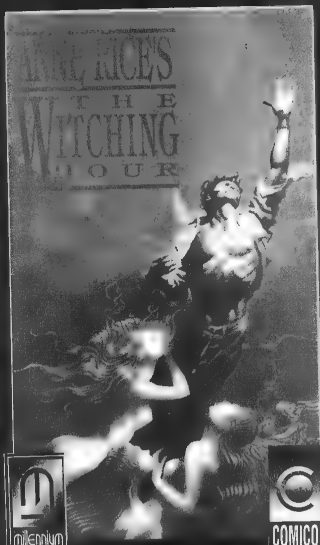


"I'd put money on the SPAWN-CEREBUS crossover."

makes me wish that he had gone down with the Titanic) he said, "So what are *you* doing about it?" And I thought about it a little bit and eventually I said, well, I'm writing good comics. I mean, that's the only thing...it's all you can do, is you keep writing good comics, and you hope that maybe it'll change something. Really, Spawn is no sillier or stranger a hero or villain or whatever than Batman or Swamp Thing or anything like that, and it's actually kind of neat. Alan came up with some fun stuff about hell, basically, and the afterlife. Alan's issue is basically a trip through the afterlife in the SPAWN universe, and a couple of things he did right at the end I started thinking about, and...I have a thing for angels. Angels are one of my things. Every year or so I think, good, that was it, that was the last piece of fiction I ever do about angels, angels are now out of my system. That was it for angels. And then a year or two later, I go back and do something else with angels. And it was just some of the stuff about the afterlife, and the idea that these spawn are sort of the army of hell and so on and so forth, and I thought, okay, let's go...it's time for Neil to do some more stuff with angels. It's basically about an angelic hitman. Hitlady. I just started thinking, and I was thinking that the only reason that you'd have an army of hell is if the other side were worse. I mean, you don't have an army to fight librarians and milk monitors. I'm sorry, you don't need one. So it's one little story about an angelic hitman, or hitlady. I'm threatening to make Todd put on the cover, "And Men Shall Call Her...Angels!" But I probably won't. It'll be coming out probably about the same time as DEATH. I think it comes out in January. And I get to be, as it is currently, the filling in the sandwich, because it starts off with Alan, and it finishes off with Dave, and I'm the one in the middle. I don't know if I'm blowing a big secret here, but I would almost...I would be willing to put huge quantities of money on the SPAWN issue that **Dave Sim** writes being the SPAWN-to-CEREBUS crossover, and I suspect it will go into black and white and be printed on tacky newsprint for all the pages that Spawn is actually in the CEREBUS world.

KEMBERLY: *SIGNAL TO NOISE, a graphic novel you did some time back with Dave McKean, is finally going to see an American release via Dark Horse. How did they end up handling this property? I'm sure they weren't the only ones interested.*

NEIL: That was through **Gollancz**. We sold **Gollancz** the world rights on the book, which means that they get to have the fun of negotiating with the Brazilians, the Germans, the Bulgarians, the Poles, and of course the Americans. And they picked Dark Horse. It's a beautiful production job, and it's a story that I'm very, very proud of.

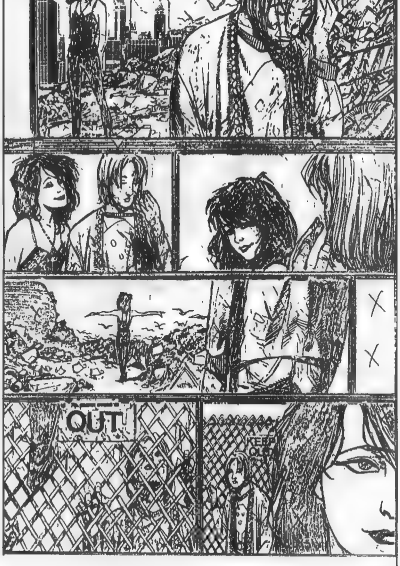
KEMBERLY: *You've had another project with Dave McKean in the works called MR. PUNCH which, as I understand it, is essentially a pseudo thematic-sequel to VIOLENT CASES in that it deals with more of the childhood aspects and elements and issues...*

NEIL: I couldn't have put it better myself.

KEMBERLY: *Oh...thank you. How is it coming? Have you been able to work on it further, or has it been sitting on a back burner waiting patiently for attention?*

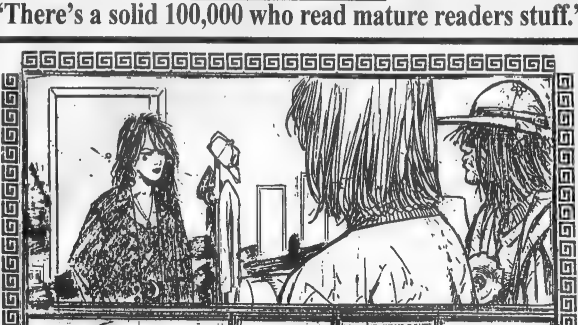
NEIL: I'm gradually catching up, slowly, thing by thing, with all the things that I'm incredibly late on, very slowly, one by

Another by Chris — page 17 of DEATH: The High Cost of Living.



Book 1, page 22 of DEATH: The High Cost of Living.

"There's a solid 100,000 who read mature readers stuff."



one. MR. PUNCH is finished in first draft. It went off to **Dave McKean**; he's read the first draft...we had a long chat this morning at peak rates to England before I came out here, about what he thinks of it and what he wants to do with it. He pointed out to me that there's a level on which, in order to try and avoid being too obvious, I probably palmed a few too many jigsaw pieces...because he'd say, "Well, what about so-and-so?" And I'd say, "Oh, well, that's obvious, that's so-and-so and so forth." And he'd say, "Well, you don't actually say that." And I'd pause and I'd say, "Well, I didn't want it to be too obvious." And he'd say, "Look, Neil, you don't have to draw the line for them, but at least give them two points rather than just one." So I'm going to go back and do the second draft and make it...I'm not sure easier is the right word, but it's due a second draft. It's like, there are those areas that Dave didn't get, and Dave is a bright reader. I will go fork through, and just draw the little parallels in. Because some of the things I thought I'd made completely obvious, he didn't get, and if he didn't get them, nobody's going to get them. So that's how MR. PUNCH is coming. He will start it...he's already been saying how he wants this bit to look, how he wants that bit to look. He's got the first nine pages mapped out in his head...and I think that's great. I'd say the second draft will be done in three or four weeks' time and Dave will start it then.

KEMBERLY: *To wrap up: BLACK ORCHID, DEATH, and SANDMAN will all be carrying the Vertigo imprint. What are your thoughts on Vertigo. Do you think it's going to succeed?*

NEIL: I don't know. I hope so.

JILL: I don't either.

NEIL: I wrote a story for the Vertigo sampler called "Fear of Falling." Basically, if there's a moral to the story, such a cut-and-dried thing as a moral, it's that if you try to do something, then, yeah, maybe you'll fall flat on your face, and if you don't try at all, then, you won't do anything. And if you fall, sometimes you wake up, and sometimes you die, and sometimes you fly. I hope it flies. With any luck, one of the things that Vertigo will do is allow more promotion to the audience that reads Vertigo comics. the comics that are now in the line. There is a solid 100,000-plus people out there who read mature readers stuff, and I hope, with luck, that actually putting them in the Vertigo line will allow a certain amount of...more marketing bucks to be spent on finding those people, more demographic stuff, more finding out who they are and getting them to read. I don't know. Maybe it won't mean anything more than just putting a label on the books that **Karen Berger** is group editor for...we don't know. DEATH is going to be the first Vertigo title, and in some ways it'll be a test.

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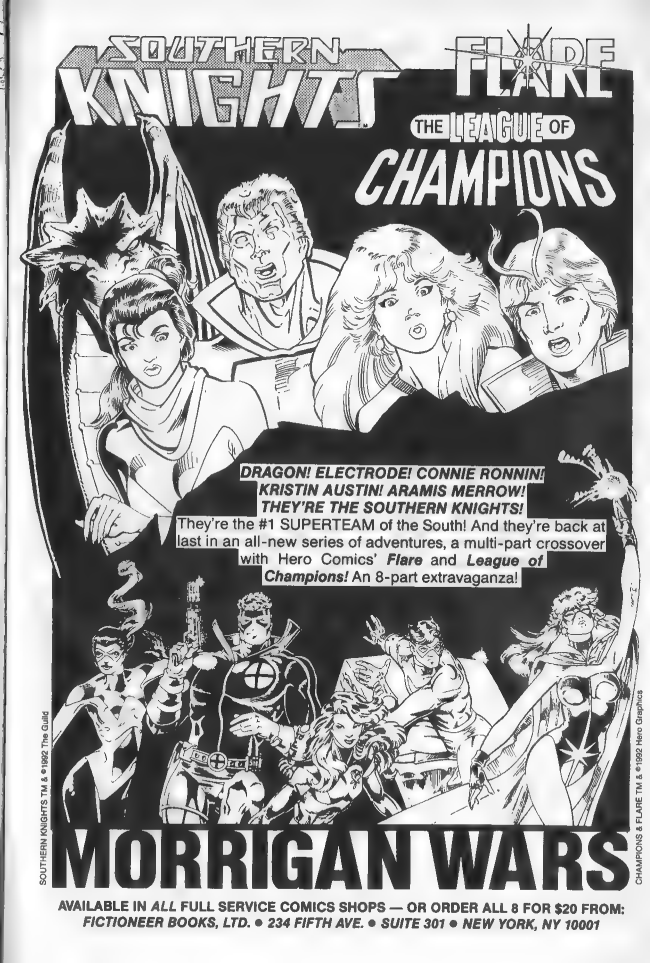
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From DEATH: The High Cost of Living – page 16's original pencils by Chris Bachalo. The finished (inker), Mark Buckingham's work is opposite.

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"Death is beautiful, gorgeous, alluring, and soft."

CHRIS BACHALO

Beginning in a cozy bar with hundreds of colored dollar bills taped to the wall and ending in a mall next to a gaudy Christmas store, an interview with Chris Bachalo is nothing short of an adventure. This self-described quiet person was as imaginative and communicative in his words as he is in his striking art on such titles as SHADE THE CHANGING MAN, LEGENDS OF THE DARK KNIGHT, and the upcoming DEATH: THE HIGH COST OF LIVING. It's that latter series, the first from DC's new Vertigo imprint, that remains most awaited. Not only does it allow Chris to re-team with writer Neil Gaiman, it also gives Death (of SANDMAN fame) a leading role spotlight for the first time. Chris has a true love, appreciation, and respect for women, and this is evident in all of his works with female characters. And in his thoughts . . .

MARK LUCAS: *Death appears to everyone differently. That's part of her charm. How does she appear to you? How do you see her?*

CHRIS BACHALO: When Neil described Death to me, he said he wanted Death to look very young, about 15. So, when I went to create Death, I wanted to create a Death that embodied the youth and free spirit of a young girl but with the wisdom and subtle sensuality of a confident older woman. When I sat down to draw the series, I was apprehensive. Other artists had been successful drawing her. She's quite popular and people expect a certain image of Death. To make things easier, I eventually decided to do what I think she should be. I used my niece Lisa as a model. That was helpful. It was fun, though. When I asked her if she'd get dressed up like Death for a photo shoot, it was like, "Uh . . . okay, Uncle Chris. Sure . . . whatever you say." One of these shots will be on page 24 of the first issue of DEATH.

MARK: *Who is Death?*

CHRIS: That's a difficult question. She's someone different to everyone. Men seem to like her because she's sexy. Women like her because she's witty. To me, she represents everything I love about women. I am a big fan of the classic artist John Singer Sargent. I'm fascinated by the way he celebrates women: their curves, their lines, their mystery. I recently went to the Met in New York and saw his work, Madame X. The feeling in that painting was what I wanted to capture with Death. She (Death) is confident enough to be very comfortable with her feminity. Death is beautiful, gorgeous, alluring, and soft, and her air of mystery is her most captivating quality. After all, we never quite know everything about Death. But, in addition to giving Death such "perfect" qualities, I wanted to make her *real*, a real person with real characteristics. Comics have stereotyped women in these horrible ways over the years. All boobs, no brain, able to save the world. I try to approach my female characters like Death or Kathy and Lenny in SHADE the same way and make them regular people. They don't have big boobs. They

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"I think Death's wisdom and wit endear her to

don't have big hips. They're more like real women. They don't have all the plastic surgery. I think that's why DEATH and SHADE have a strong female following, because one can actually identify with these characters. It works. People really appreciate that, and I've gotten a very good response from it. I think Death's wisdom and wit endear her to women. She knows everything that is going to happen; she knows all about the people she meets. She has a sixth sense that is innate to women. I think she's very attractive that way. People like her confidence. I think she can be pretty, a little bit sexy, and a little bit coy at the same time. We all see her as different people, in how we relate to our own lives and our own life experiences to what she is. Growing up, our experiences with death as children or adults has always been as Death as a frightening or menacing figure that we should fear. I think it's a credit to what Neil has done. He's added a nice, fresh perspective on the character. She's hardly menacing at all. She's somebody you want to know or talk to. She always has this wonderful wit we all like. It makes us feel more relaxed and not to fear death (no pun intended) so much.

MARK: *Do you think that's why she's emerged from a supporting character to someone the readers have taken to?*

CHRIS: Yeah! It's amazing that she's only been a supporting character and yet garnered such a following. I think it's attributable to the freshness of the character and the wonderful way she's been handled.

MARK: *You mentioned that you think part of her charm is that people can relate to her. In the current mini-series, she becomes mortal for a day. What happens when she becomes human?*

CHRIS: Not to give too much away, we pick up the story with a young boy who's experiencing difficulties and is contemplating ending his life. He meets Death and together they go through New York and visit some of the city. We follow her around and see what happens in her day as a mortal, meet some new characters, and bump into some old ones. Neil seems to be writing as he goes. He knows the basics of the story and what's going to happen. The rest, it seems, is improvisational. I get to find it all out when I read the script.

MARK: *How much input do you have on the series?*

CHRIS: Not very much as far as the actual story is concerned. Visually, it's my job to tell a story, and I think I have control on what the story looks like. When we first started the project, Neil asked me how open a script I wanted to work on. I'd always heard that Neil wrote tight scripts and I was quite flattered and surprised that he asked me that. He gave me a lot of room to work. So, as far as the book's going to look, I have a lot of input. When Neil saw the first issue, characters he may not have put later in the series, he liked and decided to put them somewhere else in the story. He's been really wonderful to work with, very generous with his time and suggestions.

MARK: *You've worked with him before.*

CHRIS: With SANDMAN (#12). That was the first story I did in comics. To be honest, I really hadn't a clue to what I was doing. Being my first book and getting to work with the famous **NEIL GAIMAN** was an intimidating experience. The first book I'd pick to draw in comics at the time would probably have been SANDMAN. SHADE was just in its conceptual form at that point. At the time, I decided I was going to do the best job I could with what I knew and let the chips fall where they may. It was a good learning experience, and everything has worked out quite well.

MARK: *How did you get that first assignment? You're probably the only new artist to debut in the pages of SANDMAN.*

CHRIS: It was quite an experience. It

On these pages, unpublished pencil sketches of Death and Sandman.

women. She knows all about the people she meets."

goes back to when I was 16 years old, in high school, and we were going through our career days. They have you fill out a bunch of forms to see what you like to do and what your talents are, to see what you're good at. The final conclusion was that I was to be this wonderful carpenter. I'm terribly allergic to dust and didn't think that would work out. However, it got me thinking about what I wanted to do (which was the whole point of the program). I'd been collecting comics for about six years or so and I'd not done any serious drawing at this point. What I did do was limited to little army battle scenes of dinosaurs and lasers and people getting killed, just little scribbles on the desk or the side of your notebook paper when you're supposed to be taking notes. I always used to throw in a picture for the teacher when I did a book report. I had fun with those and figured, "This might be something all right to do." I thereby dedicated myself to becoming an artist. My friend was taking an art class at the time and every once in awhile, when I didn't have a class, I'd jump into his art class and do some drawing. During my final two years of high school, I took art very seriously. My friends and I actually started drawing our own comics there. At this point in my life, I think as far as creativity is concerned, I was at my peak. I feel like I've lost something since then. I don't know what happened to it. I think one Halloween I got horribly drunk, blacked out, woke up the next morning, and found something was missing. Sometimes I'll just sit there and think, "That day I lost something, gone forever to that place where lost things go until they're found again." There are a lot of socks there, I'm sure. I'm thinking of getting really drunk again this Halloween or maybe getting knocked on the head, and I might get it back.

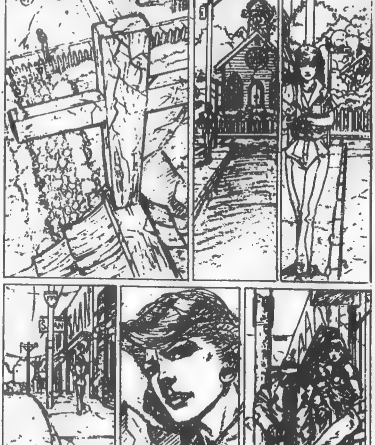
MARK: *Like Guy Gardner.*

CHRIS: Yeah. Anyway, after that, I went to Cal State Long Beach and entered their art program. I still didn't know a lot about art except for the basics. I still utilize a lot of stuff from high school I learned. It was a very worthwhile experience. Artists nowadays seem to start very young, when they're five years old. By the time they're in college, they know a lot about art. I felt like I didn't know anything about it. All I knew was how to use a rapidograph pen. I was still wondering how artists filled in vast spaces with ink. I knew how to use a pilot felt tip pen, filling in all those black areas, and thought, "God, how do these guys get these black spaces filled in? How do they make all those little dots?" I found out later about Zip-a-tone. Needless to say, I was on the naive side of things when it came to art and technique. One day I saw some work in a showcase from an illustration class. The students had done beer ads with animals that I thought were wonderful! A bolt of lightning struck me. "This is it! This is what I want to do!" The year before I got out, I had the opportunity to enroll in a course where you could choose your own curriculum. Hopefully you had your skills down, your painting techniques, design, shapes, color, and were ready to apply it to your portfolio. I very much wanted to do comics. I liked what was going on at the time. **Bill Sienkiewicz** and **Dave McKean** and **Frank Miller** were doing a lot of painterly stuff; they were true illustrators. They had transcended that realm of the traditional comic-book artist by adding a new direction and a new aspect to comics. I found it very exciting. It felt like such a wonderful time to get into comics. For that class, I did an Iron Man/Deathlok comic book that a friend from high school wrote. Before I got out of school, I sent it to all the major companies. Everybody sent rejection notices. One outfit sent me a book on how to draw. It was a little discouraging.

"Things in school can help you get in the industry."

When I got out of school, I figured I'd better find a job in art somewhere, whatever it was. So, my first job involved painting ceramic pots. It paid $8 an hour, but I was doing art. It turned out to be a wonderful experience, because I learned how to work fast and still do quality work. It was all watercolor painting. It taught me how to do brushstrokes with a sweep of your arm and get that wonderful gesture down. Very soon after that, I picked up a job with a real estate firm who were looking for a designer/artist to do brochures and such. That was an invaluable experience as well. I learned about deadlines and a lot about business and communication. I also ended up marrying the creative director. Meanwhile, a good 6-8 months after I'd sent my Iron Man/Deathlok story out, DC sent me a letter asking to see what I'd been doing lately. They must have seen some promise there somewhere. I sent another work a friend of mine and I had been working on. About a week later, **Richard Bruning** gave me a call. They liked what they saw and told me about a new book they had coming out, wondering if I'd be interested in trying out for it. He gave me over to **Karen Berger.** The book was called SHADE and was based on the original short-lived Ditko series. I did about four pages, after which they wanted to see some more weird, conceptual stuff. I did a couple more and they hired me. SHADE wasn't ready to be started at this point so Karen asked if I'd do a fill-in on SANDMAN. It was pretty exciting stuff and all happened very fast.

From 1989: Chris' first tryout for SHADE (a conservative approach). Next page: His second try, using a more conceptual approach to panel construction and design.



MARK: *Advice for artists wanting to get into comics?*

CHRIS: At conventions, I get asked a lot about how to get into the business. I like to recommend that if you can go to school, go to school. It's definitely an asset. There's no conceivable way it can hurt you. I'm a big fan of **Dave McKean, Bill Sienkiewicz, Jeff Jones, Kent Williams** and **Simon Bisley.** They have a very good ability to draw everything well. It's an asset to know how to draw people naturally, to draw an apple and make it convincing, or a kid on a bike. There are things that you can learn in school that will help you get in the industry. They also teach you about business and other aspects of art that you don't run across in comics that can also be of help and give you an edge in a competitive industry.

MARK: *What are your thoughts on the arrival of Image?*

CHRIS: I think it can only be good for the industry because it adds competition. It's going to force the other comics companies to improve their product in order to compete and retain their audience share. Instead of these companies getting comfortable, they are going to have to be more innovative and competitive or they are going to suffer. It's good for the creators. It's good for the business of comics. And, it's good for the readers because it gives everyone a choice. Having choices creates opportunities for artists and writers to express themselves which is always good. I hope they do well. The only thing I wonder about is how it will affect the market in the long run. Will it die or continue to grow? It can't conceivably grow forever.

MARK: *DEATH is the first series out from Vertigo, DC's new mature line. Do you see the industry heading that way?*

CHRIS: I hope so. I've asked the powers-that-be at DC about it. They seem pretty convinced that there is a growing market for that. I think it's great because, as a fan of the industry, it's exciting to see choice of genre in comics. It's not just superhero comics anymore. There are choices for people between 11-13 and people between 18-30. I know I probably wouldn't be reading comics anymore if it weren't for these type of

"For a woman to be beautiful, she doesn't need big

Chris Bachalo pencils — with Chris Bachalo inks. This is from SHADE #33, page 18.

comics. At 16, I found I was less interested in the superhero motif. About then, **Alan Moore's** SWAMP THING came out. That was something different. **Frank Miller's** DAREDEVIL and BATMAN stories and **Alan Moore's** WATCHMEN also caught my attention. The books were bright and innovative. I don't feel that comics as a medium has been explored to its fullest ability yet, and that's what these people were doing: broadening the boundaries. **Bill Sienkiewicz's** ELEKTRA: ASSASSIN showed how far you could take art in comics and make it work. I like to call what is happening now a renaissance in comics. We're seeing the best art we've ever seen, the best writers we've ever seen. People like the **Neil Gaimans** and the **Grant Morrisons** and the **Alan Moores** are the **Shakespeares, Twains** and **Poes** of comics. Even in the superhero titles, **Todd McFarlanes** and **Jim Lees** have really changed superheroes. I wish they'd had these type of superheroes when I was 12 years old.

MARK: *Your work has seen a lot of strong female characters: Death, Kathy, Lenny.*

CHRIS: Yes. When I started drawing SHADE, I knew Kathy was going to be a very important person. I set out to completely go away from the standard superhero title. I made a promise to myself that when I got into comics, I was going to do what I was interested in. I wasn't going to follow anybody else's style. I was going to do my style and tell the story the way I wanted to tell it. I was going to do characters the way I thought they should be. When I started doing SHADE, I wanted it to be very reality-based. I wanted to make Kathy as real as possible. I have an immense respect for women. I wanted to show that in my art. Sexually exploiting Kathy wouldn't have been doing justice to the character. Personally, I couldn't have done it. I wanted to treat Kathy with respect, as somebody I'd look up to, a strong character with a voice and personality. I wanted her to be somebody who had her own opinions and her own femininity. A strong person who was as well-rounded as I could make her. To make her as three-dimensional as I can. I think Death should be done that way too. Women are very beautiful. For a woman to be beautiful, she doesn't have to have big boobs. She doesn't have to be prancing around half-naked. It's her sensuality, her softness, it's the way her hair flows on her shoulders or the way the sun bounces off the highlights in her hair, the way she

boobs. She doesn't have to prance around half naked."

walks, the way she keeps herself, the clothes she wears, the shoes she wears and how she wears them. That's what makes a woman interesting and beautiful. I think that's what Kathy, Lenny and Death are about. I set out to make Death very beautiful. I want to be able to draw her in a way that people are going to look at her and respect her for who she is and for being a woman. I think Neil approaches his female characters in the same way. I think that's why DEATH and SHADE have a very strong female audience. They aren't being insulted by what's being done with female characters.

MARK: *Kathy's gotten involved in an alternate family lifestyle, something Dan Quayle really wouldn't approve of. How do you feel about dealing with potentially controversial subjects like the things she's become involved in?*

CHRIS: I think if it's done tastefully and not for exploitation purposes, then it's fine. I'll draw heterosexuals, homosexuals, transsexuals, whatever. As long s it's done realistically. I don't think there's anything wrong with lesbians or Kathy and Lenny's relationship. Something that's a little frustrating is that Kathy almost sometimes seems too quick to jump in bed with someone. She seems a little too impulsive at times. **Peter Milligan** and I've talked about it. He has some points about what he wants to do with her. When you go to conventions and such, you see a lot of exploitation of women (I think everyone knows what we're talking about). It's very degrading to women. I don't like it. I won't do that. It's not me and it's not what I'm about.

MARK: *The "Lenny" issue of SHADE (#26) was particularly tastefully done.*

CHRIS: I hope so. I wanted to do it tastefully. I wanted to make her relationship with Kathy real. People do those kind of things. It's very important to them. There's a lot of sensitive issues going on, but it doesn't mean it's bad or that no one participates in them. In this country sometimes, it's very frightening to see people trying to censor everything because they're so afraid of it, afraid to look at it. They're not quite sure about it themselves. If they can smash it down, they don't have to confront it in themselves. Maybe that's why there's so many homophobes running around. They can't handle it because there's something in the back of their mind wondering if, maybe, they aren't homosexual too. There's nothing wrong with it. When I handle those type of situations, I want to handle them with taste. I hope that

As I travel, I admire the craftsmanship in the construction of this maze, admire the traps and pitfalls they have wrought.
You have learned well, my servants.

Chris's first pro job — inking Jones III. From SANDMAN #12.

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"I don't want to do anything that's been done before."

comes across. I don't know if I'm being successful with it or not. I think I am. I get a lot of positive comments about it. I haven't had anyone come up and say, "I don't like the way you've done this." There was one fellow wrote a letter about SHADE #15 in which Kathy is in the recovery house and Shade visits her. They make love for the first time. It was a very important scene for me because I didn't want it to be the obligatory sex scene to get more people to look at it, showing all this nudity. He seemed to feel that way, calling it sexual acrobatics or something. I was disappointed because that's the last thing I wanted it to be. We saw in an earlier episode Kathy get raped in a way by the Troy Grenzer Shade. It was more of a bestial thing. It was almost violent and aggressive. When Shade and Kathy made love, I wanted to make it very beautiful and meaningful and everything that making love is about, being close to somebody, touching, getting to know somebody. I tried very much to do that. It was one instance when I thought I maybe could have done better with it. I was sorry he felt that way about it. In this country, "sex is bad" so if you can see some, people want to look at it. It's like saying "no" to a child; he'll do the opposite. If you say "no", he'll want it even more. We're always condemning sex but everybody likes sex. I didn't want Kathy and Lenny's story to be about sex either; it wasn't about sex. It was about Lenny and who she is and how she came to be that way. I don't think Peter, by putting Kathy and Lenny in bed together, is trying to sell sex. He's just trying to show an alternative relationship. It's very fresh and I think he does it very tastefully. I respect his ability to do that. It's why I like working on SHADE and why I like working with Peter. He's very mature about what he's doing in a world with a lot of immaturity.

MARK: *For a book that deals with realistic characters and mature themes, your art is pretty far out, pretty avant garde on SHADE.*

CHRIS: Is it? Being the artist, I don't know how to look at my art from an objective point of view. I know all the insides and where all the mistakes are. I don't know if it's being successful or not. A lot of people give me positive feedback and say it's very different and original or far out. I don't see that. I don't know what they see in it. I'm the worst person to ask about it because it goes back to the way I approach doing comics. I don't want to do anything that's been done before, to copy someone else's style. I do want to say something, but for the most part I don't know what to say or how to say it. In an industry that deals with communication and communication of ideas, in an industry that deals with the visual arts and the literary arts (which comics is very unique in), I want to try in a visual way to say what I'm about and to tell the best story I can. I get paid as an artist to tell a story as interesting as I can. Every time I approach a different story, I try to put myself in the reader's position and make it interesting for them to look at. I try to create a different feel for the story and to get a sense of what Peter's trying to say in the story. For example, earlier on in SHADE (in the teens), there was a lot of weird stuff happening. I

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"I approach DEATH in a different way than SHADE."

started to experiment with doing odd stuff with the panels, twisting things or making things blurry or way out and graphic. On the other hand, something like "Lenny's Story" isn't about that anymore. Rather than do all these weird panels and doing tricks like running things across both pages or putting Christmas box wrapping like we did in the Christmas story . . .

MARK: *That was great.*

CHRIS: Thanks . . . I thought, this was a story about these two people. I was going to make it as simple storytelling-wise as I could. I was going to let Peter's story be the most important part of the issue. The Christmas story was about Christmas. What's Christmas about? Christmas is gone; we've lost the whole idea behind Christmas. I wanted to add to that, make it almost as garish as possible while at the same time making it as sensitive as I could. I wanted to show Shade's side of Christmas as well; he's in this hotel by himself, writing Kathy a letter. He's not feeling good, he's a little discontented, and a little lost, missing home. I wanted to get across that feeling. I wanted to push the other extreme of Christmas, not to celebrate the religious holiday only but to celebrate the commerciality as well. So, I put it in the wrapping paper with all the little trinkets and Santa Clauses to get the other side of it. That's the way I try to approach it as an artist. For example, I'm approaching DEATH in a much different way than SHADE. It's not about fancy panels or fancy storytelling or big splash pages. Neil's strength is his story-writing ability, ability to do wonderful dialogue, and to tell interesting and introspective stories about his characters as well as their relationships to the things around them and what they experience. I debated for a long time on how to do DEATH and how to make it look. SHADE's about color where DEATH is about everything but color. We don't associate colorful things about death. I wanted to convey that in the story. I don't think there should be a lot of color. It's in a city (New York) where there's not a lot of color, where there're greys and browns. I wanted to keep it simple while making it interesting at the same time. I hope to show interesting perspectives on things. Instead of doing a bunch of heads, maybe show a part of a person's head talking or maybe show a person's hand. What are they doing with their hands while they're talking or what are they holding or what is their posture? Maybe we can show their feet and the way they play with them when they're nervous. For example, this story revolves around Sexton. When Death arrives as a mortal, she comes to New York and is given a fictional family. She lives in this apartment where this family used to live. Sexton's heard that her family had gotten killed in a terrible accident. He's real careful about asking her. He says, "I'm real sorry about your family." She goes, "Oh, you know my family," like she's thinking about the Endless. He goes, "I heard they got in an accident." She says, "Oh, *that* family." My challenge was how to tell the scene. At the time, she's fixing his pants. When he meets Death, he falls and tears his pants. Kids today have rips in the knees in their pants. Neil thought it would be funny to have holes in his knees, then rip his pants in a garbage dump. When Death sews up his jeans, she asks, "I notice you have holes in your knees; should I leave them or sew them back up?" Rather than showing all these head or profile shots, when she's sewing his pants, we only get to see him holding his coffee. All we see of Sexton is his coffee while he's talking about it, while we show Death in the background absorbed in sewing the pants. I don't

Character sketches for Joy, Dana and Prudence, from DEATH: The High Cost of Living.

"Laying out INCREDIBLE HULK was easy. Some-

know if people find these touches more interesting or not. I think they are. I don't know if my artistic style is my best asset — I think I only draw okay — but I think my storytelling ability is very strong. I want to make it easy to read, but I want to make it interesting to look at also. The dialogue is already very interesting with the wonderful writers I've gotten to work with: **Peter Milligan, Neil Gaiman,** and **Jamie Delano.** I want to add to their work rather than compete with it.

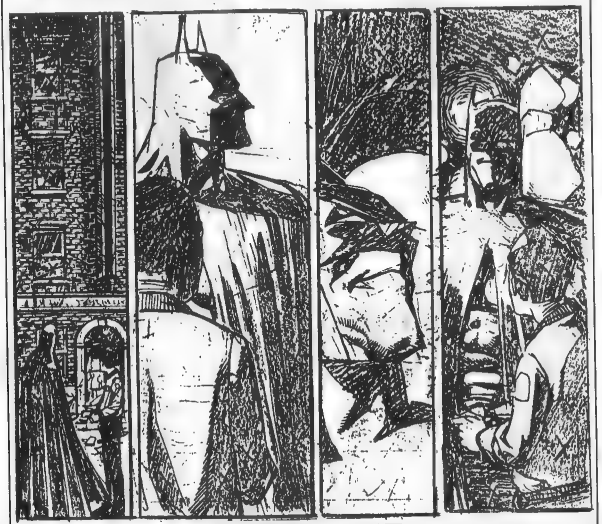
MARK: *How do you approach a more mainstream book like LEGENDS OF THE DARK KNIGHT?*

CHRIS: Actually, the story I did for LEGENDS OF THE DARK KNIGHT was similar to SHADE and DEATH, dealing with the supernatural and with people. It's not about Batman. When people see the book, they'll see Batman in about only three panels (actually, a little more). It was a very comfortable book to draw because it's what I usually do with SHADE or DEATH which are books about people. I didn't change anything storytelling-wise or artistically when faced with handling a mainstream character like Batman. In fact, I thought he fit in quite well with the type of storytelling I usually do. If I were to do something more mainstream, I'd stick to a more traditional style. For example, in the INCREDIBLE HULK issue I did (#400), I tried to complement the two. I've had a few comments on the way I draw people. They seem to like the facial expressions. On a book like INCREDIBLE HULK where it's not so much about people but about action and adventure, I tried to incorporate the two and do a more traditional comic-book-type storyline and maybe add a bit more reality. On one hand, I wanted to keep the traditional Hulk character with the muscles, the all-out action, and Hydra being tossed everywhere. On the other hand, when I do a character like Rick Jones, I try to add a little more of what I'm good at, drawing real people. I tried to be sensitive to what he's trying to accomplish in the comic, to bring the person he's in back from the dead. I can understand him being very desperate.

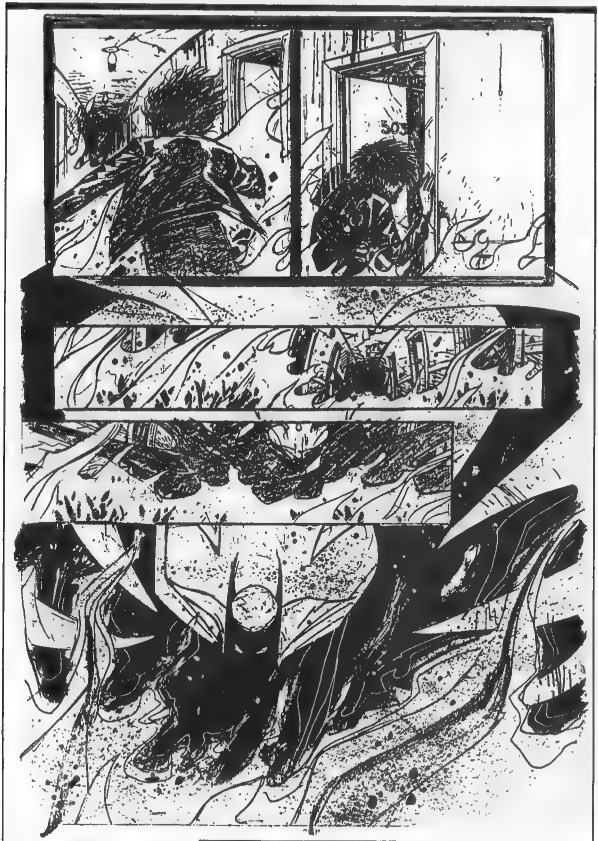
MARK: *How did you like working Marvel style, plot versus full script?*

CHRIS: I'd always wondered what it was like. Now that I've done it, it wasn't as hard as I might have imagined it would be. I always think the worst-case scenario. Laying out INCREDIBLE HULK was very easy. Where sometimes it takes me an hour to lay out a page of a

Here and next page: Chris' pencil work for his upcoming LEGENDS OF THE DARK KNIGHT.



times it takes me an hour to lay out a page of SHADE."



"I've signed on to do SHADE for at least a year

SHADE, with INCREDIBLE HULK I was laying out three. The pages came very fast and it was easy. I do like full script better because I don't have to spend as much time breaking the pages down. I'm still new at that. That's something that is different with DEATH. Neil wrote it movie script form. I had some problems with the story because it was supposed to be 27 pages long. I broke it down to 29 pages. I knocked it down to 28, scrunched some panels (we had one page with 14 panels). **Peter Milligan** does everything for me in that aspect. I suppose at this point he's spoiled me.

MARK: *If you could work on any character, who would you like to work on?*

CHRIS: I already am now. I think if I could start anywhere and do any character that I could choose, it would probably be Shade. I think it's wonderful. I enjoy Peter's writing. I enjoy the room he gives me. I may go completely away from what he gives me as long as it works. Peter may have a close-up here; I may push it back or make things explode or whatever. I like the characters. I helped create the characters. I think that adds to it. More than any other book I've seen, there's a lot of room to use many different art techniques, which I find very

HULK #400 — Mark Farmer inking over Chris' pencils.

WHEN I WAS MINDLESS, WHEN I COULD BARELY SPEAK, THAT WAS ONE THING--BUT I HAD AN EXCUSE!
AND WHEN IT WAS BANNER'S MIND TRYING TO MANIPULATE THE HULK'S BODY--A MENTAL SQUARE PEG HAMMERED INTO A ROUND HOLE--THEN I HAD AN EXCUSE!
BUT NOW HE STILL PLAYS ME LIKE A FIDDLE!

and will probably take the book up to #50."

exciting and very liberating.

MARK: *Without giving away too much, what's coming up for SHADE?*

CHRIS: I start back on SHADE #33 which will be the first issue of SHADE under the Vertigo label. Shade apparently is still looking for a body (I don't know what happens in the issue before that). Six months have gone by which he has spent inside the Area of Madness, and he's about to arrive back on Earth. He's in the Area of Madness and he's going back. Apparently, the people in the Area of Madness have taken the precaution of reserving bodies all around the world for instances like this where someone such as Shade might need one. This body Shade is going to take is in a mental ward. He's been brain dead for quite awhile, doing a lot of nothing. Kathy and Lenny are with Roger, Kathy's old boyfriend who is a ghost stuck in limbo and wants to move on. He's been given the responsibility of helping Shade get in this body. Then he can go wherever he's going to go. The three-issue story (#33-35) is about Shade getting into this body and the resulting circumstances. Shade's going to be a lot different, more like the Hades-type Shade, though I don't think it'll be Hades himself. He's going to be on the surly side and is going to look different, not like the Shade we're used to with the red, flowing hair and the softer, rounded face. He's going to be more hard-edged. It's kind of awful, but after I drew him he looked like **Luke Perry** on BEVERLY HILLS 90210. He'll have black hair, deep-set eyes, and more chiseled features, almost the James Dean type. As far as I know he'll keep the coat and traditional garb. We'll also be dealing with the madness. We'll follow this fellow named Brian Juno who is obsessed with torture. Kathy and Lenny are going to run into him. He becomes part of this Garden of Pain every time he tortures someone. To get into this place, he has to torture whoever he happens to be torturing worse and worse each time. Apparently it's quite a euphoric feeling for him. As we progress, we find that Lenny and Kathy have taken over the operations of an old inn. It sort of has on an old murky feel to it with endless hallways and all sorts of other fun things.

MARK: *Like "Barton Fink"?*

CHRIS: Yeah. Lenny's father will buy it. It will be a place where all the people who get the madness will come to. Sort of like a Noah's Ark-type theme.

MARK: *You're going to start doing the covers on SHADE as well?*

Promo ad for SHADE #27 by Chris.

CHRIS: I wanted to do a little bit more with SHADE. **Karen Berger**, the editor, asked me 5-6 months ago if I'd like to do an inventory cover. I did one and they liked it very much. In fact, they gave the cover to Peter and asked him to write a story around it (issue #30). I based the cover on an old painting I did from my college days with a billiard table as a vast landscape. The cue ball has somehow become animated and I have him picking up the 8-ball, sort of quizzically looking at it. It worked out quite well. As it stands at this point, **Brendan McCarthy** will be doing covers until about issue #32. I'll be doing them on a regular basis after that. Hopefully, everything will go okay. I haven't worked with color in awhile. I am going to miss **Mark Pennington** on the series. He's blossomed into a fantastic inker. It looks like **Mark Buckingham** will take over the inking chores. He's also a wonderful talent whose work on MIRACLEMAN has been spectacular.

MARK: *What else do you have coming up?*

CHRIS: I've signed on to do SHADE for at least a year now and will probably go farther than that. I'll probably take the book up to #50 and then see how everything is going. They're doing a lot of promotional material for Death: T-shirts,

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"I'm doing trading cards for a second set DC is releasing."

a bisque model, and there's talk of doing a tour for the Vertigo line. I'm also doing some trading cards for a second set that DC is releasing. I'm getting to do Death (on the beach) and a set of BOOKS OF MAGIC cards.

MARK: *I want to wind this down by asking, if you met Death what would you have to say to her?*

CHRIS: Oh, God! *(Laughter.)* I suppose I'd ask if I could buy her a hot dog with everything on it. It's a little inside joke. When you read DEATH, you'll understand.

Speaking of meeting Death, recently I went to New York. I've not flown that much and was nervous about flying. But, I was thinking, wouldn't it be disturbing to be sitting on the plane, flying at 30,000 feet, and suddenly notice Death walking down the aisle!

"If you're interested in drawing superheroes and have

MIKE FRIEDRICH

In Part I, Mike discussed how he first came up with the bizarre idea of starting an agency for writers and artists. He also related the surprising account of what a comic-book agent actually does — which many Star Reach clients will probably be glad to know after all these years!*

In Part II, Mike explains the degree that talent, luck, business savvy and connections play in breaking into the business. He also tells why certain publishers are better to work with than others, and why publishers would want to give creators more rights . . .

MARK BORAX: *The 1980s saw an explosion of alternative publishers both in black-and-white and in color. Why did Dark Horse succeed in giving Marvel and DC a run for their money when the others failed?*

MIKE FRIEDRICH: Because, at least so far, they have been able to really combine *brilliant* marketing with *excellent* creator relations. They have been able on the marketing side to acquire very high profile properties in the movie arena that other publishers did not recognize as valuable, and then they were able to form very *strong* relationships with a large number of talented people to then produce books that sold an awful lot. It's also becoming very obvious that they have a different economic structure than Marvel and DC have. Whether this is because they don't have the overhead of working out of New York or whether it's personal choice, I'm not quite sure, but they can work on a lower profit margin, gross profit margin, than Marvel and DC.

Most significantly, they've chosen rather than put the money in their own pocket to put it in the pocket of creators, so the creators can get a better deal working on an existing "work-made-for-hire" property at Dark Horse than they can on *most* Marvel and DC properties — not all but most. And the opportunity for new creators is very lucrative as well.

Of course, the market determines everything; it all depends on sales. When a new property doesn't sell you can't make any more at Dark Horse than you can working anywhere else.

MARK: *What overall marketplace changes do you see as a result of this explosion of the 1980s alternatives?*

MIKE: Well, I think that the big changes are happening in the area of broadening the market for comics. In addition to superheroes there has grown a market for the wider heroic fantasy category. This is what Dark Horse has done quite successfully with the material that they produce by **Geof Darrow** and **Frank**

WONDER WOMAN, LEGION, '92, STARFIRE, ANIMAL MAN ©1992 DC Comics Inc. / DR. DOOM, SPIDER-MAN, DR. STRANGE, AVENGERS WEST COAST, MARVEL FANFARE ©1992 Marvel Entertainment Group, Inc. / THE BADGER ©1992 First Publishing / "Cat In Comics" story & art ©1992 Mark Whaley.

six good-looking pages you can get a job tomorrow."

Miller and **Walt Simonson,** et al.; it's very fantasy/adventure oriented but it's not superheroes in the traditional sense.

In addition, what I see on the horizon — but it's a topic for another entire conversation — are comics that are more of an interest to women as well as to men, and material for children as well as for teenagers and adults. I see a lot of growth *slowly* occurring in the children's and older adults' areas, as well as an expansion of the kind of material in the young adult audience towards women as well as towards men

MARK: *How hard is it, actually, to break into this business as a new creator?*

MIKE: Well, that depends on what your role is. As a writer it's *extremely* hard. It's very, very difficult to find an editor who has the time to even read your work to evaluate it. It tends to be that writers wind up convincing artists that they're good, and the artists talk to the editors. That frequently happens. With artists it depends on whether you're a penciller or an inker, and it depends on what kind of material you want to do. If you're someone who is interested in drawing superheroes and if you've got six good-looking pages you can get a job tomorrow if you show those pages to the right person. It normally doesn't happen that way, but it *can* happen. As far as inking goes you tend to have to be the right person at the right place for that. We have found that it's most easy for us to represent new pencillers entering the business who want to do superheroes. Hardest for us to represent, new writers. And new inkers are kind of in the middle.

MARK: *Why is it that editors don't make time as much for writers?*

MIKE: Oh, it's just time. Editors have to produce a tremendous volume of work on a monthly basis, and they just do not have the time to read on speculation a lot of stuff. It's hard enough if you're an editor to keep up with the comics that are actually being produced in the industry, much less read the comics by people who aren't in the industry yet.

We have the same difficulty here at the agency. It's hard for us to find the time to read writers' works. We have been a lot more successful with writers who have gotten their foot in the door one way or another, even if it's with a small independent publisher. Then there's at least a comic book you can read. You can read a comic faster and get a sense of whether a writer is good, even if the artwork is terrible, than it is to read a script.

MARK: *So it's a time thing where you can look at a page and judge an artist in a second, but to judge a writer —*

Pin-up from WONDER WOMAN #50, by Linda Medley.

MIKE: You can judge the writer looking at a page that's in print, where to sit down and read two pages of single-space text of scene descriptions and copy without the pictures is much more time consuming, and it's harder to evaluate.

MARK: *In breaking in, the qualities of talent, luck, business savvy, connections, how much do all of those play, do you think?*

MIKE: Well, it does help to be at the right place at the right time, so there is luck to some degree. Talent is the main aspect of it; if you don't have the ability then you aren't going to get the work. There's sort of like three things that define someone who works regularly in comics: they're a good talent, they do their work on time, and they're nice people. You need two out of those three to be able to have steady work. If you've just got one of those three it's not going to happen. You could be the nicest person in the world but if you turn your work in late and it's not that good, you're not going to get the work. But conversely your personality is not that important, either, as long as you're reliable. You may be somebody that's really uncomfortable dealing with editors, but if you do your work professionally, meaning you get it in on time and the quality is good, then you're going to be able to have a career.

MARK: *What precedents do Eastman and Laird's multimillion-dollar success with NINJA TURTLES set in terms of the overall state of the industry?*

"If Kane had stopped doing BATMAN after three issues,

MIKE: Well, I think that they showed that if you create something that you believe in you can grab the gold ring. They are an inspiration to people to follow their dreams. What they've showed is that there is a tremendous potential for children's comics that has been left untapped. We've pretty much *abandoned* children, as far as comics are concerned, over the last 20 years, because the comics stores have not done a good job of catering to children and their parents. Also, they've shown that if you hang onto the licensing rights to your material you can gain a lot more. Or if you work with a publisher that pays you a fair share of licensing revenue, that that area can be brought to your benefit on top of just the creative joy of doing your own work.

MARK: *So, if creators hold onto certain rights when they sign contracts, obviously they can have a vast benefit.*

MIKE: Right. We wind up in our job *constantly*, at least two or three times a month, having very extensive conversations with clients about the trade-offs in selling new properties to various publishers, because all publishers have different sets of rights that they want to have, or *insist* on having; you as the creator have to decide how much to give them. Obviously, TURTLES was a one in a thousand shot. How many more of those are there going to be? We don't know. No one could have predicted that ahead of time. But the interesting thing is that it *did* happen, and therefore it can happen again. And a *lot* of it has to do with your personal enthusiasm. We tend to feel that the closer you feel to a property the more you should hang onto it.

MARK: *So, there are certain publishers who provide more opportunity than other publishers for a creator to keep rights.*

MIKE: Right.

MARK: *But those publishers may be providing less of some other thing.*

MIKE: A larger publisher will tend to put a lot more money guaranteed in your pocket for something you've come up with, but in trade they're going to want to control a lot of the back end possibilities. A smaller company may not be able to offer you as much guarantees up front, but you're going to wind up with a larger chunk later on. With the TURTLES, for instance, they published it themselves and they found their own licensing agent who then went out and sold the property, it wasn't that a publisher gave them a great deal.

MARK: *So they own 100% of their product.*

MIKE: Right. And that option is available to people, too, and we've counselled creators on what steps you need to do to become a publisher. Most creators when they hear all about that decide that they *don't* want to be publishers. *(Laughter.)*

MARK: *Everyone hears a lot of the term "creator rights" bandied about. What are creators rights and have they changed?*

MIKE: Well, you're catching me on a day where, although I've been known for jumping up and down about creator rights for my entire career, my mood this afternoon is more that creator rights are self evident. Creators own and control their own work; people control their own lives. A creator should recognize that to achieve whatever they want. Whether it's to do the best BATMAN story that DC owns and controls outright or whether it's to create a CONCRETE that you own outright — or that **Paul Chadwick** owns outright — is a matter of personal choice. I think **Norm Breyfogle,** who is having a great deal of fun doing BATMAN these days, has the full amount of creator's rights that **Paul Chadwick** has doing CONCRETE. It's really a matter of just deciding that you're important as a person, and what you do is important. If you choose to sell what you do, that's fine, you have the right to do that.

MARK: *Are you drawing a distinction between potential and applied creator rights?*

MIKE: Yes. Applied in the field, in

Stylish version of Dr. Doom by Charles Adlard.

it would have joined the dust heap of strips from 1938."

NOK!
BAM BAM
C'MON, C'MON! IF THERE'S NOBODY HOME, WE'LL GET A LEATHER CUTTER AND LET OURSELVES IN.
YOU MOFSIN'T TO THAT--THIS BOOT WAS HAND MADE IN ITALY.
I AM HANS STURM. HOW CAN I HELP YOU?

Pencils from THE BADGER by George Freeman.

the trenches, which is what I do the *rest* of the week, is the matter that I think the creators need to constantly educate the publishers about. This is what Star*Reach's job is; all the time we're attempting to educate publishers on how it's in their interest to give the creators a better deal. We think that there are a lot of areas where creators could be treated better that would lead to greater revenue for publishers as well as the creators.

MARK: *If I create the next BATMAN why is it in the publisher's advantage to give me the better deal of me keeping my own rights to that?*

MIKE: Because the only way this is going to be "the next BATMAN" is if you and your personal vision are applied to the property for a long period of time. The comic BATMAN didn't become the mega-property BATMAN for a long period of time. If **Bob Kane** had stopped doing BATMAN three issues after it started, it would have joined the dust heap of all the other strips from 1938 that do not survive now. If you as a creator don't stick with something then it's not likely that it's going to succeed. It's your vision that connects to the world at large. It's in the publisher's interest to *encourage* you and your vision to make that connection with the readership. And if the publisher makes that connection the right way, then it has a hit. And if it fails to make that connection in the right way, they've wasted their money. So, I think that they should put a little bit more of their money at risk keeping the creators happy so that they make that connection better. Our problem as a *field* is that we're not generating the million-dollar ideas every year, and we have the potential to do that.

MARK: *Why not?*

MIKE: I don't think the right conditions exist at the publishers who are in a position to *market* the million-dollar ideas. They don't have the kind of deal structure that enables creators to feel comfortable working with them for many years.

MARK: *So, we have million-dollar ideas such as SIMPSONS, TURTLES, even MAUS — And all of those have been created outside the normal realm of the comics publishers.*

MIKE: I would call X-MEN a million-dollar idea. It was a solid idea and Marvel Comics was able to develop it and make it work, but it's now a 15-year-old idea. What's new on that level?

MARK: *Obviously, Lee and Kirby created a few million-dollar ideas.*

MIKE: Of course.

MARK: *But the deal structure in the time when Lee and Kirby were working was probably less advantageous to creators than what exists today.*

MIKE: Right.

MARK: *So, what's going on is that they created so many million-dollar ideas under a less advantageous deal structure?*

MIKE: Ah, but you're forgetting — if you're going to be specific about it —

"It would be hard to motivate a young Kirby to maintain

Stan Lee was in a position where his publisher treated him very well. Stan was able to maintain his enthusiasm for the material for many years, to go out and create the product and make it work well. On the other hand, **Jack Kirby** feels today that it didn't work for him, but at the time Jack seemed to be happy; he continued to do the work. There was enthusiasm for the work that occurred at that time.

It would be very hard to motivate a young **Jack Kirby** today to maintain the position he had in 1963. He wouldn't do it. In 1963, he didn't have a hell of a lot of choice but to stick with Marvel Comics In 1993 he would have a *tremendous* range of choice. And Marvel knows that

Just a fraction of the visualized creations that Jack Kirby brought to us during "The Marvel Age of Comics."

the position he had in 1963. Then, he didn't have a choice."

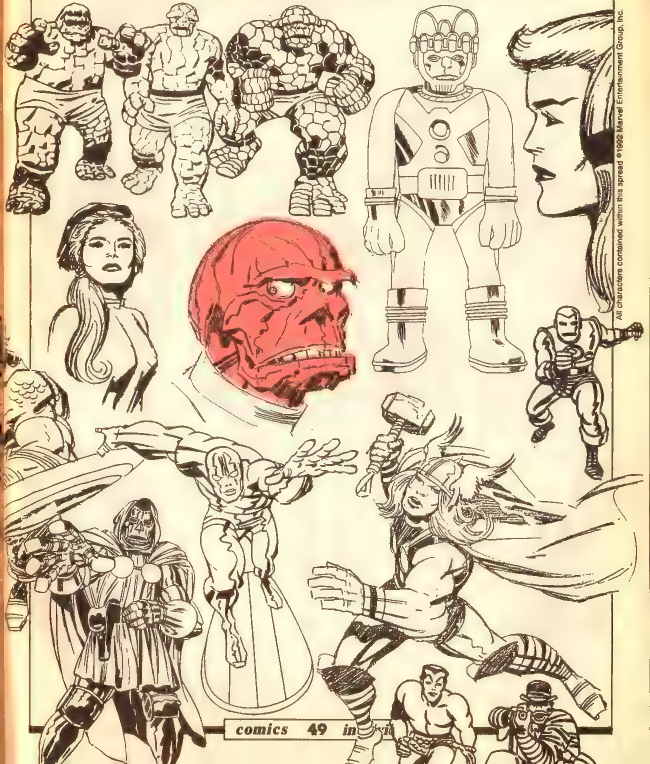
and therefore would make the deal for him a lot better. **Stan Lee** was well compensated, and continues to be well compensated, for the enthusiasm that he brought to the material.

MARK: *Because he had a strong personal relationship with Martin Goodman?*

MIKE: He had a publisher behind him who *recognized* the value of what he provided.

MARK: *And why didn't that happen with Jack?*

MIKE: I don't know, I wasn't there. I don't know why it worked for Stan either; I wasn't there. I'm just looking at the situation. Obviously, Stan got the support that he needed, had the rela-



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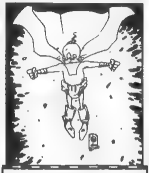

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"The publisher is the arbiter of what's done with material."

"Cat In Control" story and art by Mark Wheatley.

tionship with the publisher that enabled him to produce what he did for the period of time that he did, and continue for decades afterwards to promote the material, to help make those characters what they are now.

MARK: *About five or six years ago there was the great Marvel Comics versus Jack Kirby affair in which it seemed like almost everybody in the industry was on the side of Jack. Did our collective soft spot for Kirby blind us to Marvel's side of this debate?*

MIKE: Hm, that's an interesting question. I haven't thought about this issue in a long time. *(Long pause.)* Without having really thought about it, I felt that it was a dispute that didn't need to happen, and that there were things that both Marvel and **Jack Kirby** could have done differently that would have resolved the situation better. I thought both Marvel and Jack wound up having mud on their face, which is what public arguments wind up always doing. I'm not in favor of public arguments, as best as I can avoid them. It doesn't do any of us any good to operate that way.

MARK: *At the point at which Jack felt ripped off because Marvel was not returning his original art, which was worth a lot of money, what would you as an agent have done for both parties?*

MIKE: Well, not really knowing the *full* circumstances, I'm going to assume that there was a lot going on that I'm not aware of, that's not in the public record, so I really can't comment. We've never faced a situation that extreme in our own experience.

MARK: *What could be done to improve the current deal structure at the major publishers to engender more of the kind of engagement with the work that Stan and Jack had, to create the next BATMAN, the next CAPTAIN AMERICA?*

MIKE: Well, if the goal is to create the next BATMAN and the next CAPTAIN AMERICA, that is, to come up with the next breakthrough superhero concept, I think that you need to tie in more directly the creative talent with the particular property that they come up with. In creative ways especially that's the big barrier right now. Within the Marvel and DC structure — this is not true at other publishers necessarily — the publisher is the ultimate arbiter as to what a creator is going to do with the material. By contract the publisher can decide that the creator can be replaced, or their work changed, and that creates an environment where the publisher is always dominant over the creator, rather than a partner. No matter how *positive* the day to day relationship is, the dominance is inherent in the structure.

We're beginning to see evidence that those kinds of decisions can be done differently. We're beginning to see superheroes produced by other publishers that are a little bit more creator dominated.

MARK: *Are you happy with the current state of creator rights?*

MIKE: I'm generally happy. I have specific problems with specific publishers over specific issues, *all* of them. There's no perfect publisher out there. But I do *generally* feel that the opportunity is there for a creator working within the market that exists — I've got to limit it in *that* fashion — that if you like to produce material that the current marketplace is interested in buying, there is a very very wide range of options for you. I'm quite pleased. I think the *major* battles over the position of creators in the industry were fought in the '80s and were won and are pretty much over.

MARK: *Marvel recently acquired a new corporate head, Terry Stewart, who is more of a business person and less of a comics lover, I think.*

MIKE: Oh, yes. I think that's one of the reasons why he's going to be a great president for Marvel.

MARK: *Where do you see this new direction heading? This new leadership, where do you think this might lead the*

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"Comics are entering the mainstream of entertainment."

company?

MIKE: Where is Marvel going to go? Well, Marvel, looking at it from the perspective of a **Terry Stewart**, has a lot of very interesting challenges. They've got a corporate owner that is interested in increasing the stock value of the company as quickly as possible, as well as an interest in maintaining a very strong, positive cash profit every month, so there is a real challenge to maintain the current profitability and expand it as rapidly as possible. So I think that we're going to see an awful lot of effort made to try to find out how big the Marvel market really is. No one has really made that effort up until now, in my mind. Marvel has gone along with the flow very very well and has helped direct and develop the market somewhat, but I think the next few years we'll see Marvel being extremely aggressive in going out and attempting to expand the channels that exist for the comics, and opening up new ones. All of which I find very exciting.

MARK: *What does it mean, exactly, that Marvel has gone public, are selling stocks on the stock exchange?*

MIKE: I think it's helped bring us out of the backwater to the edge of the mainstream. We're not in the mainstream yet, but we're slowly creeping into it. It was one more major little signpost that we are becoming part of the larger entertainment world. It's no coincidence that DC Comics was acquired internally by Warner Bros. within the Time/Warner structure, that Warner Bros. wanted DC Comics to become part of its operation. It's no coincidence that Universal Pictures buys into part of Harvey. It's no coincidence that Dark Horse has been able to set up a movie production arrangement with 20th Century-Fox, indirectly with a company called Largo. All of these things are recognition that comics are now becoming part of the mainstream of entertainment, as opposed to the kind of sideline that we've been for many many years. Going public, I think, really is a financial reflection that this is happening.

MARK: *The connection between comics and films, where will that lead the comics industry in the near future?*

MIKE: I think it's going to lead us into more mainstream work, if you want to *call* it that. There is going to be a push to create material that appeals to a wider readership, whether that's TERMINATOR or TURTLES.

MARK: *I've heard recent rumors of impending rack wars in which Marvel and DC are intending to unleash a flood of titles designed to augment their market positions and perhaps squeeze out competition. Is this a true scenario?*

L.E.G.I.O.N. '92 pencils by Lee Moder.

MIKE: Well, not totally. We've heard that Marvel and DC are very aggressively going to expand the number of titles that they are producing — that's

"I believe that the industry will continue to expand,

Sample art — teaming Spider-Man with Starfire. Pencils: Scott Benefiel. Inks: Shepherd Hendrix.

already begun. The question is going to be what impact will that have on the market. It's hard to predict. There are some predictions that Marvel and DC will just eat into their own sales, that the more new books they put out will cut down the number of buyers for the older, less popular, existing DC and Marvel titles. There is another opinion that the comics that get hurt will be those produced by the smaller publishers because the retailers won't have enough money to order *those* books when they have the superheroes.

My own *personal* opinion is that it's more the former than the latter. Yes, there will be an awful lot of retailers who won't order the smaller publishers' books. But — they'll wind up holding a lot of inventory in Marvel and DC superheroes that they won't be able to sell, and they'll go out of business.

MARK: *Will the upcoming rack war scenario end up benefiting or hurting the industry in the long run?*

MIKE: Well, we're going to have a lot of benefit and a lot of pain, it's not a clean scenario. There are going to be a lot of people hurt by a rapid expansion.

People who don't have the strength to stand up against the larger publishers are going to be hurt.

MARK: *When you say people do you mean smaller publishers?*

MIKE: Smaller publishers and the creators who work for them. The larger publishers themselves are at risk, and the creators who work for them, because if their expansion eats into their own sales they wind up spending a lot more money to make the *same* amount of money. So they can be hurt. I believe that the industry will continue to expand, but more at the rate of the expansion of the stores, not so much in the rate of expansion of the titles. So I'm predicting that there's going to be a significant *cutback* from Marvel and DC sometime in the next couple of years.

MARK: *A cutback of titles?*

MIKE: Right. And at that point the people who are working on those titles are going to get hurt, as well as the company. But I believe the *bottom line* is that the industry will be larger two years from now even *after* these cutbacks.

MARK: *Why? What will make it larger?*

MIKE: More stores are opening up that are smarter stores. You know, we have a product that people want to read — people love comics — so the channels, as they continue to expand, will bring in more readers.

MARK: *So, are we going to sort of see this retailer Darwinism here where it's survival of the fittest, the retailers will have to get smarter or else they'll go under?*

MIKE: That's how they went from the

but at the rate of expansion of stores, not titles."

stone age to the dark ages, the same process that's continuing now. As we speak someone's going into business and someone's going out of business. This has been going on all along for years.

MARK: *As the president of Star* Reach what are you saying to your creators about the upcoming rack wars?*

MIKE: Well, the real trick is quality, quality, quality. The people who are able to establish themselves as delivering quality work on a consistent, regular basis are going to be able to have work regardless of a collapse that might occur. The people who are erratic, who do not improve and only deliver barely acceptable work now when the material is in high demand, they're going to be the ones who wind up with less work when there is a contraction.

Most artists and writers, once they are brought into the business, do not have ongoing *quality* discussions with their publishers, to the degree that they have them *before* they get into the business. When you're new you hear a lot about how good or bad you are and what you need to work on. Once you're established they stop talking to you about that and generally focus on when you're going to turn it in. So you have to be self motivated as a creator to do better. And if you *don't* motivate yourself to be better with every job then you're going to find yourself out of a job in a couple of years.

MARK: *What differences do you see between the creators who were out there in 1965 when you broke in versus today?*

MIKE: The people who were working in comics in the mid '60s tended to be mostly guys who were in their forties who had survived the collapse of the '50s, and who were in the position of being comfortable in comics without an awful lot of opportunity to take their work someplace else. The television market wasn't big, there wasn't a big storyboard market for comics artists then as their is now. Certainly my feelings were biased, I was young and full of beans, but my perception then was that most of the people were pretty tired. The only real enthusiasm was from people like Stan and Jack, who were really enthusiastic about what they were doing. There wasn't an awful lot of that kind of enthusiasm elsewhere.

It wasn't much of a *surprise* to me, as the industry expanded during the '60s, got back on its feet and started to *grow* again, that when they went looking for people to do the comics those who they found were young people. They hadn't had young people coming in for 15 or 20 years at that point. That started a process that I think continues today, where we're still very much a young person's business. Most of the people who produce comics are in their twenties, to some degree in their thirties, and the people who are in comics in their forties tend to be the ones who have been able to maintain their enthusiasm.

MARK: *They are?*

MIKE: Yes, they are, absolutely, because otherwise they'd be out doing something else.

MARK: *So the pattern is changing.*

MIKE: Oh, yeah. There's a lot more excitement in comics today on the part of the creative community than there was 25 years ago.

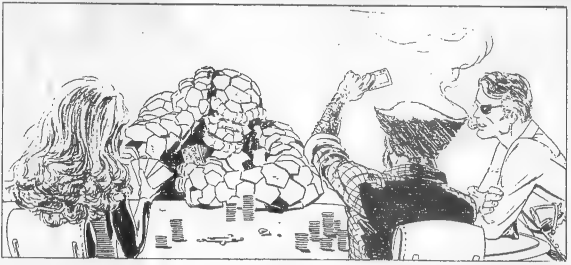
MARK: *Speaking of industry efforts, what kinds of changes would you like to see so that comics can get ready to enter the next millennium?*

MIKE: I think that the key is to stay vital. The comics industry has a real

Tight as they may appear, these are pencils — by Mike Gustovich.

"I'd like us to develop more breadth in kinds of material."

Two views of David Ross' pencils. Above: WEST COAST AVENGERS from 1992 (featuring Dr. Strange and Wanda the Witch). Below: MARVEL FANFARE panel from the mid-1980s (featuring, among others, The Thing, Wolverine and Nick Fury.)



vitality now that's enabled it to be as effective as it has been, and to *grow* as much as it's been growing for the last many years. It needs to maintain that in the areas where it is currently working. As well, open up to more *different* kinds of expression; different ways of drawing people, different ways of telling stories, different kinds of stories to tell. We do a really great job within the genres that we work in now; I'd like to see us develop more breadth as far as the *kinds* of material we deal in, and a little bit more depth in terms of the level of character that people will read.

I'd also like to see us go in *simpler* directions. I think that we have neglected too much our *very* young readers. It's a real special *gift* to be able to create stories that appeal to six-year-olds and ten-year-olds, and I think we need to make some effort to really communicate with that audience better than we do today. □

In Part III, Sharon Cho comes aboard, explaining why she traded friends, family and a normal job in L.A. for a shot at becoming the world's second full-time comics agent in Berkeley, California.

Look What's New In
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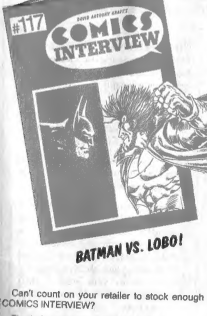

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DAK (from 1976) with Blue Oyster Cult.

BLUE OYSTER CULT BULLETIN

Dear **Mr. Kraft,**

I thought that you'd like to know about the latest release from **Blue Oyster Cult.** I've enclosed a copy of a letter that Moonstone Records sent out to all members of the BOC Fan Club.

Along with the two songs on the movie soundtrack BAD CHANNELS, BOC has written more new material destined for a hopeful new CD release this winter. They're currently touring heavily and playing all of the new songs.

The **Blue Oyster Cult** Fan Club is now in its third year. This year, they'll be publishing two MORNING FINAL magazines, plus the long-awaited lyric book. Yes, IMAGINOS will be included, since you expressed interest in those lyrics in a letter column.

Anyone interested in the club can write to:

The **Blue Oyster Cult** Fan Club
P.O. Box 931324
Los Angeles, CA 90093

How can anyone turn down the opportunity to feast their eyes on all of those great **Pearlman** and **Meltzer** lyrics?

Rob Reich
51770 Comanche, Apt. 4
Fort Hood, TX 76544

Thanks for the tip, Rob, and we'll pass the word along to BOC enthusiasts. As the Cult might well say, on your feet or on your knees — or flat on your back — this one's not to be missed. Lo! The lyrics — at last! (Aside to Bob G: Say hello to Uncle Eric.)

— DAK

BLUE MOON

Dear Cultist:

The **Blue Oyster Cult** has been involved in some very important work that we thought you should know about.

The **Cult** has scored their first feature film — BAD CHANNELS — for Full Moon Entertainment. The video of the film and the new B.O.C. CD are available now at your local music/video store.

As you know, this is the **Cult's** first new music in over five years. Along with the 19 instrumental cues that make up the score, the **Cult** has given us two brand-new songs: the vintage-sounding "Demon's Kiss" and the dramatic "The Horsemen Arrive (the epic)"; The BAD CHANNELS CD contains over 70 minutes of music and is a "must have" for the **Blue Oyster Cult** collector — we know you will enjoy it!

Dean Schachtel
Moonstone Records
6930 Sunset Blvd., 2nd Floor
Los Angeles, CA 90028

P.S. If you are having trouble finding either the video or CD of BAD CHANNELS, please contact me.

INTERVIEW welcomes your thoughts and comments in the Last Word. Send your correspondence to: DAK, COMICS INTERVIEW, 234 Fifth Ave., Suite 301, New York, NY 10001, or fax your letter to (404) 782-6625. Please include your name and address.

INTERVIEW reserves the right to edit letters for length and clarity.

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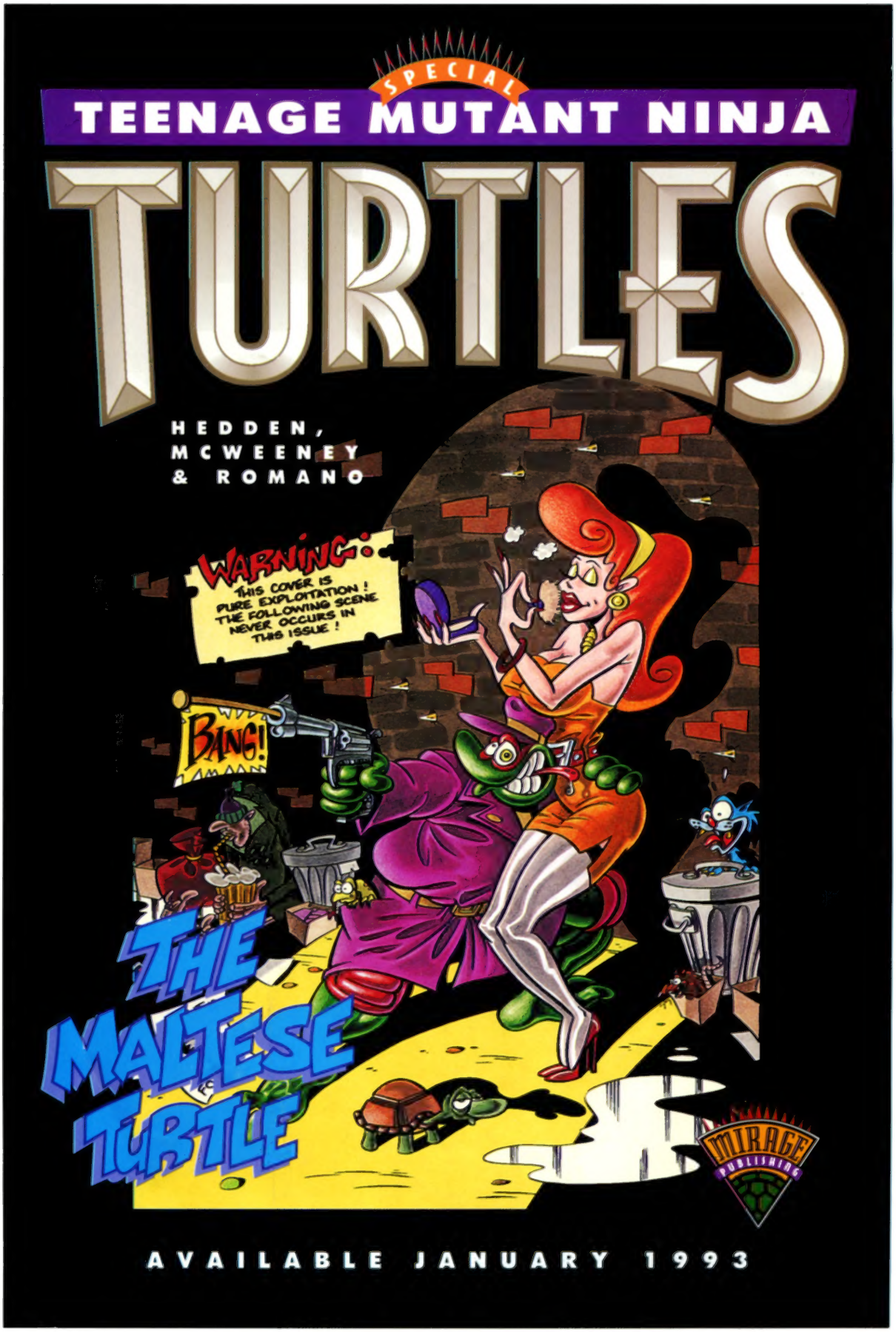
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